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SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FANTASTIC

OCTOBER, 1970

Vol. 20, No. 1

**DEAN R. KOONTZ NEW COMPLETE FANTASY NOVEL
THE CRIMSON WITCH.....**

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TED WHITE: EDITORIAL

Right. We goofed. Last issue, in big letters on the cover, we said, "*Beginning in this issue: FANTASTIC ILLUSTRATED a new illustrated feature by Jay Kinney*". There was also a reference to the feature in the letter column. But—it wasn't in the magazine.

We goofed. Purely and simply, we overlooked the four-page feature in making up the issue from page proofs, since we were working with the type from our typesetter and Jay Kinney's four pages were straight camera-copy requiring no type.

Unless we make the same mistake again this issue, you'll find the *Fantastic Illustrated* feature intended for our August issue here. And the feature we'd intended for this issue will be along next time. Bear with us; every time we institute a change, it requires rolling a few kinks out and the development of a new set of habit-patterns.

Speaking of changes, our cover design this issue is by Caroline Negretti, and the painting is by Gray Morrow. Caroline called us up and offered us her services as a cover designer after learning from one of my recent editorials that I'd been reduced to doing the cover designs myself. I will cheerfully step back and admit that pleased as I've been with my own work, Caroline has added something more with her lovely hand-lettering and imaginative design. I don't know whether she'll want to keep on at it indefinitely, but we're pleased to have her with us.

At this point I'd like to say something about the remarkable enthusiasm FANTASTIC (and her sister magazine, AMAZING) has been engendering among many of you.

I'd like to, but . . .

The simple fact is that your enthusiasm, fervent as it may be, may not be enough. It is their enthusiasm

which has led many excellent artists and writers to contribute to this magazine—simply because they liked what we were doing with it and wanted to become a part of it—and it is your enthusiasm which has led you, the readers, to write us an average of a hundred letters an issue (when, a year ago, we were lucky to receive one or two an issue).

But.

Unfortunately, this enthusiasm has not reflected itself in sales. As a matter of fact, sales have suffered considerably in the last year.

A year ago this issue, we published our last 50¢, 60%-reprint issue of FANTASTIC. The October, 1969 FANTASTIC had about sixty pages of new stories and features, and over eighty pages of reprint stories. Earlier that year (in AMAZING) I'd asked you if you'd support the magazines at 60¢ if we dropped the bulk of the reprints. The overwhelming response among those of you who replied was *yes!*—and many of you went on to excoriate the reprints as worthless and of negative value to the magazines. Sentiment seemed sharply in favor of getting back into the business of publishing new stories full-time.

Oddly enough, the October, 1969 FANTASTIC sold *better* than the previous 1969 issues of FANTASTIC. It is hard to say what factor was most responsible for that—the relatively clean cover, my own lead novelette, the reprints by Milton Lesser, Mack Reynolds or Don Wilcox, the new features, sunspots . . . or what? In any case, that issue enjoyed the best sales of the year.

The December issue—our first at 60¢, with a seventeen-page reprint "classic" by Ross Rocklynne and otherwise all-new fiction and features—bombed. Despite

the fact that we gave you what you'd asked for (and your letters indicated your pleasure with it, too) and an excellent line-up of new stories, ranging from over forty thousand words of Piers Anthony's "Hasan" to short stories by authors like Alan Nourse, James Schmitz, Tom Disch and Tom Scortia—despite all that, and freshly designed interior department headings as well, the December, 1969 FANTASTIC sold ten thousand *fewer* copies than the October, 1969 issue.

We hoped it was a momentary reaction to the price raise. We hoped sales would recover, because that ten-thousand-copy loss effectively *wiped out* the additional earnings to us of the new 60¢ price, leaving us with a far more extensive budget and the same income.

It takes some five months or more after an issue has gone off sale for us to receive complete sales figures on it. For that reason we cannot respond immediately to either our losses or our gains. It takes about half a year after the fact to discover our mistakes.

I don't regard our change in policy a "mistake," of course. It was, I believe, our only viable move. But thus far it hasn't helped us. Why?

I have discussed the problems involved with publishing a science fiction (or fantasy) magazine in these editorials before. The most serious are not those of an editorial nature—they have little to do with a magazine's *content*—but rather the publishing and distribution. Costs rise daily. Typesetting costs go up as labor costs go up (and modernization to computerized typesetting makes for short-term added expenses). Printing costs rise with the cost of both paper and labor. (The recent wildcat trucking strikes directly effected us since our printer, World Color, is located in western

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 124)

He found himself in a strange world, wherein lived people with unusual Talents, among them the beautiful Crimson Witch of the Eye Mountain. Taming her was to be only the beginning of his dangerous quest . . . !

THE CRIMSON WITCH

DEAN R. KOONTZ

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

Prologue: THE CRIMSON WITCH

SHE CAME SPINNING out of the thunderstorm, mad as all hell. Lightning flashed above her, rippled across the horizon like a great, semi-transparent jellyfish, sinking liquidly into the horizon. The sky was a uniform gunmetal gray as if the clouds had been hammered into sheets and welded together from horizon-to-horizon by some industrious God of Melancholy. Thunder *boom-aboomed* like mountainous waves crashing against weathered rocks, each clap trailing off into the whisper of seafoam. *Boom! Ssshusscrack!* Her anger boiled as fiercely as the elements, lanced through her mind in awesome, painful flashes.

Her red robes fluttered behind her as she drifted through the night, swept in a halo like satin wings, filtered the lightning into the color of freshly spilled blood. She plunged into the dank, heavy clouds and came out in the spaces between, unruffled. Following the pulsations of the mammoth storm, she moved downward toward the small and fearful earth.

A black gull swooped toward her, oblivious of her approach, chortling to itself, dreaming of worms and insects, of things that squirmed and were good to eat. She puffed it into white smoke and gray ashes, zipped through the spot where it had been, moving down and down . . .

"Damn him!" she shouted to the thunder.

Her robes fluttered wing-like.

"Damn him!" she roared again. And she did not mean the gull.

The storm echoed it back, madly clashing its cymbals, insanely thumping its drums.

"Damn him to Hell!"

Echoes in other moments of the storm.

She could have damned him, too—literally. She could have sentenced him to living Hell or death or a dozen different things inbetween. If he had been normal, like all Commoners, she could have lifted him up bodily with the twitch of a single finger, twirled him about without ever really touching him, and sent him plunging straight through the crust of the earth and into the bowels of eternal damnation—or at least into permanent juncture with solid rock. But he was not a Commoner. And in that lay

the crux of the problem. All the twiddling of all her fingers could not stop him from doing what he had done to her, from taking her and using her as he wished. As she flew now, rain in her face, the fire in her loins told her it had not been entirely rape, not completely one-sided. After all, he was a handsome man . . . But no. No! Her magics had failed on him, and he had taken her. She must consider it rape. She must continue to roil hate through her mind, continue to build her animosity into formidable structures. He had used her!

And no one used Cheryn in any way. She was master of her mind and of her body. There was no one above her, no one to tell her what to do, how to do it, or when it should be done. She used others; others did not use her. It had always been like that! No one used Cheryn the Crimson Witch and got away with it.

Suddenly, she was below the clouds, flashing toward the earth. Rocks, trees, huts, and rivers flashed by below, colorless and nearly featureless in the storm gloom that sapped it of life and made all the world cower beneath its black splendor. Ahead lay the mountain with the red eye that stared blankly at the night, its pupil flickering now and again. She struck for it. Slowly angling in toward the shelf of earth and stone that protruded beneath the eye, she landed gently upon the soles of her tan, bare feet and rushed forward into her den.

The Death Screen hummed as she passed through it, recognized her, and closed its invisible mouth instead of biting. There had been a time, when she had first created the Death Screen, when the stones at the foot of the cliff had been littered with the flesh and the bones of those who thought they might dare her invisible barrier to seek her lair and her



soft and pliant form. Now, examples having been set in abundance, the stones were clean below, and her privacy was assured.

Inside, the polished black stone floor glittered brightly with the reflected tongues of the hearth fire. She could have devised regular lighting, for that was not a Lost Art, but there was something special about a fire, something that appealed to her more than the cold blue bulbs of quasi-fire. Now, even the hearth fire was unnecessary, for her eyes were aflame brightly enough to illuminate the darkest of caverns. Aflame with hatred. Well-nourished, carefully-grown hatred.

"I'll teach him!" She spat the words out to no one but herself. Beautiful, she remained strangely alone, seeking no companionship but the comfort of her own magics and the things they could do for her. Warm, she fought to be cold, and her reputation about the kingdom was one of chilliness and aloofness, one of odd solitary smugness. She paced the middle of the room, stood before a cauldron of bright green liquid that held her face in as much detail as a mirror of fine quality might. It was a fine face, a lovely face. The midnight hair tumbled around smooth, perfect skin, contrasted magnificently with her green-green eyes, framed her pert nose and her honey-dripping bee-stung lips.

Her voice changed from fury to an electrified calm, from razor screech to a thing oh hum-drum and windmoan. "As I am the Witch of Eye Mountain, the Crimson Witch, Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai, thus I command you to clear, to show me the vision I seek." She closed her gem eyes, strained her forehead.

The liquid began to bubble, forming froth that swam to the edges and clung to the iron cauldron like filings to a magnet.

Then the bubbling grew less and less until the surface had once again become calm and smooth. But it no longer reflected her lovely face or the sleek curve of her sensuous neck, the pert upthrust of her breasts. Now it showed pictures . . .

She opened her eyes and stared at the vision.

Her face was gone . . .

Instead, there was a man and a dragon . . .

Chapter One: THE TREK BEGINS

JAKE REINED his mount, digging his feet hard against the beast's thick sides, and came to a halt, swaying as the beast swayed. He crossed his arms on the great horny ridge that was the front of his saddle and sat looking across the gorge. Steam snaked up from below where the Ice River splashed onto the Hell Boulders, *sissing*, dissipating itself in a furious explosion of white, condensing and continuing beyond as a new and purer stream, smaller in size, but warmer. Far away, across the crack in the land that some Commoners called Devil's Grin and some called The Lips of Satan, stood the purple mountains like rotting teeth, dark, emerald forests ringing them like diseased gums. The mountains tempted, beckoned to him. He watched them as clouds, white and full, drifted among them, curling like fog fingers of some sentient mist creature. At the mountains, he would find that which he needed, that which he had come here for. He let his mind indulge in fantasies of success. Finally, his hind-quarters itching and sore, he slid from the giant back of his mount, dropped the last

ten feet to the ground, shook his wild mane of blond hair and delighted in the clatter of his walnut shell necklace that hung to his waist. Rounding the colossal leg, he said, "Yonder is Lelar."

"Lelar gives me the shivers," the dragon said, lowering the huge head that topped its graceful neck. It stared across the gorge with him, clucking its tongue and sighing heavily.

Jake kept his gaze fixed on the mountains as his mind fiddled with the remnants of his wishes. "Why should anything scare you?"

The dragon, Kaliglia as he was named, snorted, clucked his giant pink tongue in his cheek again, making a sound vaguely like a shotgun blast muffled in a pillow. "There are stories."

"And that's all they are. Stories. Nothing more."

Kaliglia shook his head negatively, stirring a small breeze that played through Jake's hair. "Lelar is an evil kingdom. It has always been an evil kingdom, ruled by King Lelar since its founding more than six hundred years ago."

Jake snorted his disgust, pushed his hair back from his face. "Now, how could that be? Even in this country, men don't live that long." He stretched, yawned. He sat on the ground, folded his brawny arms across his chest and drew up his knees. He still had thoughts of the witch, the red-robed wonder with the body of a goddess. He remembered her sleek legs, her hand-sized breasts and taut, chiseled nipples. He also remembered her weakly issuing curses and waving charms, wanting him as much as he wanted her but unwilling to admit it, to give in and enjoy. He wanted to laugh as the memory lodged in his mind and replayed itself over and over. He shook his head instead. Walnuts

rattled. "The longest a man has ever lived, that I know of, was the Priest of Dorso. Kell mentioned he was 245 or so."

"I would not judge," Kaliglia said, misunderstanding the reason for the man's amusement, "until I had heard some of those stories for myself. You form opinions without any evidence. You are rash and undisciplined. And you seem to accuse me of foolishness."

"No. The Sorceress Kell told me you were a reliable and noble beast when she gave you to me. I trust her. You aren't a superstitious fool—just a little misguided."

"Maybe. But you don't know the stories." There was an I'm-going-to-make-you-beg-to-hear-them-too tone in his rumbling. He bobbed his head up and down on the end of his slender neck as if agreeing with himself. He clucked his tongue again, wiped his lips with a hard, yellow tongue, clucked again.

Jake sighed, still staring at the mountains. "Well, tell me one, then."

Kaliglia settled down onto the massive pillars of his legs, knees bent, rolled slightly onto his side, shaking the earth and sending a dull booming reverberation through the nearby countryside. He sucked in an enormous breath, exhaled slowly. "You are too bullheaded to really listen, I'm sure. Your biggest problem is an inability to admit your own narrow-mindedness. Or to admit you are wrong. But I'll tell you anyway. Once, several years ago, a sailor came to the home of the Sorceress Kell. He was a weathered, beaten, half-starved hulk who had no mind left to him. Rather, his mind had been locked within itself, doubled and twisted and tied in so many knots that all his memories criss-crossed and short-circuited him into delirium. He did little but babble and drool. He could not even

feed himself with any degree of success. He had to be attended to day and night, for if he were left to his own devices, it was quite probable that he would unwittingly bring about his own death, tumble over a cliff or some such. The Sorceress Kell had to open his mind, reach into it with her many and sundried powers and untie it so he could be whole again.

"Over the days that this required, she began to piece together a story so horrible as to make her seriously question its authenticity and yet so detailed as to demand that it be believed. There are some things a man can be made to believe are truth by various conniving drugs and a clever drugsman. But the problem with drug-induced fantasies is that they have little verisimilitude, very little shaping detail. This story was too detailed, too finely drawn to be anything but genuine. In those days, Kell confided in me, coming out from her hut and sitting with me in the evening when the stars shone full and the sky was clear and endless. She told me his story in day-to-day installments. Thus, she unloaded some of her horror onto me, sharing the impossible burden of ugliness that the sailor had imparted to her with the spilling of his tale.

"It seems that this sailor, Golgoth, had signed aboard a sailing ship bound for the kingdom of Lelar from the kingdom of Salamanthe, that sheltered and exotic island nation that depends upon trade to maintain itself. It was not a matter of working in exchange for pay that induced Golgoth to enter as a ship's hand on this particular cruise. No, the situation had darker roots than that. He had been in a fight in a dockside pub and had killed a man. The only way he could avoid the death penalty was to sign on for ten years

in the service of a merchant marine vessel. It was a good opportunity, considering his other choices. It meant a place to sleep, a hope for the future, and a means of steady and lucrative income. He leaped at the chance to be free, vowed never to take another drink and thus stir his killer rage, pitched in to his sailor's duties with much vigor, and secretly made plans for escape in Lelar.

"The journey began as a good one, blessed with stormless skies and sound wind." Kaliglia paused, held out his tongue to collect the rain water that was now falling lightly. After a moment, he continued: "But when they reached Lelar, things immediately began to darken."

"It's beginning to sound like a wivestale." Jake held out his own tongue for a wetting.

Kaliglia grumbled good-naturedly. "I would bite off your head if I were not so amiable."

"You'd get indigestion, old son."

The dragon weaved his head agitatedly, sighed, sucked air, sighed again, but continued. "The first night in dock, the first mate got drunk and knifed the captain over some petty argument about black-marketing a crate of fruit."

"What's so supernatural about that? Drunken brawls and petty theft are common among seamen—as Golgoth bears testimony to."

The rain fell harder.

"Then," Kaliglia said, pausing dramatically, "rats infested the supplies."

"So?"

"Don't you see?" the dragon snorted. "Murder and rats. Murder and rats. What more could you wish to see to prove that something wicked and debased is bound to happen?"

"There are always rats around docks, and they are always infesting ships and supplies and cargoes."

"Okay," the dragon rumbled. "Then I will get on with Golgoth's story and see if you think *that's* normal!"

"Please do."

Both took another tongue wetting, sucking at the rain, before Kaliglia continued with Golgoth's tale.

"Golgoth, as I said, planned to escape from the ship and set up life in Lelar. His superiors—the second mate was made captain by a vote of the crew—were not as aware of his status as were the original captain and the first mate (who was now confined to the brig and ordered to live on bread and water until their return to Salamanthe where he could be given a fair trial and summarily executed for murder). The watch that had been kept over Golgoth was neglected by the new officers, and the criminal found his escape much easier than he had anticipated. On the third day of their docking—rather, on the third night—while the ship waited only to lay in new provisions and cleanse the craft of vermin, he slipped out of the common quarters and onto the deck. He snapped a hand into the neck of the lone watchman, and disappeared over the railing without so much as a whimper of protest or notice from anyone. He was again a free man. But not for very long.

"Seems he drank too much in a dockside grog house and entered into roulette with the house as his opponent. The game, apparently somewhat less than honest, had soon drained his pockets of all that jingled and all that crackled when folded. He found himself out in the streets, staggering about with no coin either to quench his thirst and belay the onrushing headache that pounded dully

at the rear of his brain or to rent a bed in a one-night rooming house. He lurked about the docks, forcing his befuddled mind to come to grasps with some plan of action to rescue him from what could prove to be very dire circumstances indeed. Finally, he tried beating a smaller sailor with the idea of making off with his money. But the smaller sailor happened to be a foot-fighting expert of some renown in the area. Ten minutes later, Golgoth was sitting in a jail cell, three of his teeth missing, and a bruise splotching one entire cheek and half his chin. He moaned about his misfortune for a time until cellmates threatened to bruise more of him than his miserable face. Then he began examining the circumstances from an optimistic point of view, deciding that—no matter what else might happen—he had a bed and a meal coming. He settled down to sleep, the liquor temporarily mollifying the pain in his mouth. Yes, he reasoned, he was well off. If the new officers realized he was a convict doing time on the ship, they would certainly not extend their search to the jail. That would be the last place they would look. When he got out, they would be gone, and it would be safe to walk the streets of the capital. And when he was released, he would not be so foolish as to pick a male victim no matter what his size.

"But Golgoth was planning uselessly. It was not to be that simple. In the blackest part of the night, some hours before dawn, guards liveried as under the House of Lelar came into the jail and collected the four prisoners in custody there. They were chained together and led away, all of their protests and questions answered only by the slam of club to groin. They soon learned their lessons and grew moodily silent, not daring even to talk

among themselves. They were marched through the streets to the castle of King Lelar where they were put into private rooms, the doors locked behind them.

"These rooms were sumptuously decorated. The walls were covered with brilliant crimson velvet. The floor was a swirl of golden-threaded marble. Later, servants delivered the best of foods, and large quantities of it. Golgoth was served wine that had been processed from the best vineyards of the kingdom, dark and light stuff as sweet as honey, as smooth as water. Even a whore was brought to him, a wondrous woman with enormous breasts, and he was encouraged to indulge himself to his full extent. Being some time without a woman, Golgoth indulged in the whore several times before dawn. Only then did the nature of this treatment begin to have its effect upon him. He grew weary and fell into heavy sleep. And when he awoke, there was fear in him like a cold stone in his stomach. He had come to realize, whether through his dreams or his waking thoughts or an amalgam of both, that the treatment he was receiving was much the same treatment a condemned man might expect on the evening before his execution."

Jake coughed, watched the lightning flash as the storm passed on to the west and the rain began to slow in its fall. "No trappings, please. Just the bare story."

Lightning flashed dully.

Thunder boomed like baby giants laughing.

The rain was cold and good.

Kaliglia snorted but went on. "Golgoth was brought before King Lelar that same morning, though the meeting had none of the airs of a royal audience. Golgoth was brought into the royal chamber by three guards who held him at sword point as if

he might turn and scamper if they dropped their attention for an instant. Lelar sat in the background with several white-robed officials, much as an observer. Golgoth was tied firmly to two thick ropes, one on each ankle. When he asked what was to happen, he was clouted and told to remain quiet in the presence of Lelar. Then, with little ceremony and no warning, too fast for the poor man to get his wits about him, he was thrust into a circular blue aperture in the wall beside the king's throne."

"Thrust into the wall?"

"Yes."

"Is this the portal to my own world that Kell has told me about?"

"Yes again."

"Go on."

"Inside the wall, Golgoth was weightless. He seemed not to amount to a single gram as he floated about in the gloom there. And that is just what it was. Impenetrable gloom. Only one spot of light shone, the portal through which he had been shoved. Beyond this, King Lelar and his advisors stood hunched together, peering in at him. Then, just as he was getting a hold on his fear, great gusts of wind clutched at him almost with the sensitivity of fingers, bending around him, molding to him, spinning him away in the gloom. The portal dimmed to a mere spot of light, a pin prick, fainter, fainter, fainter. The rope unraveled and unraveled, his only hold on the real world.

Kaliglia paused to catch his breath.

"And?"

"And then came the smoke ghosts."

The harshest part of the storm was gone now, blasting between the towering peaks of the Twin Towers, its black trail still darkening the sky, the faint tint of the setting sun tracing gold behind it.

"Smoke ghosts?" Jake asked.

"That's what Golgoth called them. They were creatures composed of smoke. They were bilious and unreal, yet they maintained some mockery of form. They were mists, yet he could feel their hands upon him, more solidly than the eerie hands of the winds, ice hands that drove needles of cold sleep through him, deep into him.

Jake shivered a chilly ache that was not altogether new. The only other times he had felt it were burned brilliantly into his memory. The first time had been when they had buried his mother. They had taken her to the cemetery in the oblong box and had left her there beneath the earth, left her alone. They had come back to the skeleton house, come back to the rooms like hollowed out ice cubes where her presence had held the fire that burned no longer. He had been taken up the long set of winding stairs to the bathroom. They had cajoled him into showering, his aunts, and had shoe-horned him into his pajamas. But on the way to the bedroom, he had stepped on something cold. He had looked down, and he had seen one of his mother's hair pins still twined through with a strand of blond hair. A shiver ran through him then, had flooded to a scream that had lasted an hour until the doctor could get there and give him a sedative. That first time, that first cold ache was a knife plunge through his bone marrow, a thing he would always remember. The second time had been when he had stepped through the dimensions and had found himself in this world and had realized that the old world was behind him and that he had exchanged realities. That time, he had just barely choked a scream. "And what did they do with Golgoth?" he asked Kaliglia.

The dragon rumbled. His voice

cracked. He sniffed and began again. "He felt the smoke ghosts touching him, humming ghostly moans as if they wanted to tell him things. He lost consciousness then, screaming, just as he felt the ropes being retracted. He remembers nothing else until the Sorceress Kell opened his mind and freed him of his horror."

They sat in silence for a moment.

"Well?" Kaliglia asked, wiping a tongue across his thick, black lips and blinking his enormous eyelids down over his blue and green eyes.

"Well what?"

"Now do you believe Lelar is an evil kingdom?"

"Perhaps."

"Then we won't be going there?"

"Oh, yes, but we will." Jake stood and stretched.

"But with the smoke ghosts and—"

"I have to go there. It is there that the portal to my own time line exists. Without it, I must remain here forever." He walked to the beast's side, pulled himself up the great back, climbed into the natural horn saddle. "Let's get up to that rock bridge and camp there tonight. Tomorrow morning, we cross into Lelar."

Kaliglia turned his truck cab head around, looking over his shoulder, snorted with disgust. He lumbered to his feet and crashed off along the gorge in search of the natural bridge . . .

Chapter Two: THE CRIMSON WITCH

SHE BENT OVER the cauldron, her hands clutching at the iron rim, squinting her eyes so that her eyebrows almost met, and concentrating as hard as she possibly could, concentrating until her head swam

a little and her blood pounded dizzily in her temples. The liquid in the pot was hazing, eddying with ebony and ocher, streaked through with gamboge and silver, damping out the picture of the man and the dragon that she had been watching so intently. Too intently. She had become so absorbed in the picture that she had neglected to hold it on the surface of the liquid. Now it was slipping away from her, lost in the swirlings of colors. She doubled her force on it, set it to bubbling again. The silver formed bubbles that burst and splashed back as ebony onto the gamboge surface, swirling into cream and ocher and amber . . . Once more, froth collected at the edges of the pot and boiled there until she eased back some of the pressure of her magics. Then the liquid cooled again, smoothed into a mirror that reflected her face, the perfect greenness of her eyes, the perfect upward tilt of her haughty little nose. She snorted, stamped her foot, released control of the liquid.

The hearth fire flickered.

Outside, the storm had reached the mountain and was surging against the peak, caught in the down-drafts that were turning it backwards onto the valley once more.

Lightning flashed.

Thunder erupted, boomed, crashed backwards, echoed into quiet, only to erupt again, pounding, stomping across the sky.

She exerted herself again, turned on her magics. The liquid cleared once more and presented a picture of a man riding a dragon alongside a deep gorge toward a natural bridge that would eventually carry them across the river and into Lelar. The man clung to the great horny ridge of the saddle, fighting to stay on during the bumpiest moments of the ride, leaning

against it and relaxing when the way grew smooth. He was truly a handsome man with a magnificent mane. She wondered what thing could draw him from the peace on this side of the gorge to the horror and evil that lurked in Lelar.

Then she remembered to get mad at him again. "Damn it!" she snapped, stamping her foot hard on the floor again. She kicked the kettle and screamed almost at once, dancing around and trying to grab hold of her injured toe. When she got hold of herself, she reached into the toe with her magics and set everything straight again. It stopped hurting.

She turned back to the cauldron, called the picture back again, and concentrated on hating him. He had used her! She mumbled the words of the proper chant. She mumbled them forwards, then backwards. She blinked her eyes thrice, twitched her nose to the left once and to the right twice. Then she concentrated . . .

But he remained seated on the dragon, cocksure as when she had begun the chant, as undamaged as he had been before she had muttered a single word. She had cursed him to fall into the ravine, fall into the steam to a fiery death on the hot boulders below. But there he sat. Cocksure. Damn him! She spat into the liquid and tried again. This time, she tried to ash him, to burn him with searing fire of the sun, to crumple him into dry, gray useless dust. But that didn't work either. He leaned against the horny hump of the dragon's back, oblivious to her efforts, unaware that she was using her powerful magics on him.

She let the picture cloud, turned away from the cauldron.

Wasn't she Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai?

And wasn't she the Witch of Eye Mountain?

"And aren't I the Crimson Witch, feared by all the Commoners?" she asked the walls of the room, the tapestries that covered the dirt and rock beneath.

But the walls did not answer.

"Well, aren't I?"

Still—silence.

In anger, she struck life into two rocks and repeated to them the question that the walls had chosen not to answer. The rocks quickly agreed that she was, indeed, all of these things that she claimed to be: Cheryn the Daughter of Mulgai (and, yes, Mulgai had been the greatest Witch of Eye Mountain that any Commoner had ever shuddered beneath, though she was a gentle woman and kindly disposed to the Untalented as well as the Talented), the Witch of Eye Mountain, and the Crimson Witch (as some of the more romantic Commoners had taken to calling her—chiefly because of her red robes that she always wore). A sight: darkness all about except for the shimmering cinnabar form of the shapely witch cruising between the mountain peaks, sliding along the air stream into the eye that was a cave. Yes, a sight to stir the heart of many a Common Untalented boy, though he never might taste of her breasts, never might know the pleasure of her thighs.

She struck the rocks dumb as they requested, life being too much of a burden for creatures accustomed to the inactivity of inorganic existence.

She turned to the storm that had pushed back into the valley in an effort to run the mountains at the far end where it had failed to run these. Questioning it like an inquisitioner, she threatened to torture its non-sentient soul if it did not respond.

Thunder cracked.

Lightning exploded in fireworks of yellow and white.

The night reacted to her whims.

The air was electrified.

She crossed to the rough-hewn entrance and passed through the Death Screen, feeling its hundreds of testing prickles as it determined her nature and name. She stood on the lip of rock outside, watching the thunderstorm boom about her, watching the stormclouds swarm around her, dipping their dark bellies against the peaks of the lower mountains. She raised her hands, clapped them thrice. Three cannon volleys of thunder answered her summons, booming about in the stone, moaning and echoing, threatening to shatter the lesser stones with their voices. She winked her eyes, and another flash of lightning leaped up and down the dark sky, lighting the world from horizon to horizon.

There was but one course of action to follow now that her Talents had failed, now that her magics had been tried and found wanting. She would follow them, keeping always out of sight, always in the background until the perfect opportunity presented itself. She would wait until they were teetering on the brink of some impossible chasm, and she would send a great wind to blow upon their flank and toss them over. Or she would wait until a snake lay in their path, and she would lift it with the invisible fingers of her magics and toss it upon them so that it might bite the bastard with its death-cored fangs.

Lightning . . .

Thunder . . .

A gull screeched, coming in toward its nesting place in the cliffs.

She lifted a finger.

She burned it out of the sky.

She lifted from the ledge and floated

into the darkening storm. The winds rose and fell about her, fluted her red robes and sent them shimmering with brilliant pulsations of crimson and rouge and red the color of blood . . . Rain lashed her but did not leave her wet. It stung her cheeks but did not leave a blush. Once, lightning struck full upon her, but she was neither burned nor shocked. She lifted arms to the storm and held it against her finely formed breasts, suckling its fury on her marble nipples. She moved on, in pursuit of the man named Jake and the dragon called Kaliglia, waiting for the perfect opportunity . . .

Chapter Three: THE CRIMSON WITCH

SHE SETTLED THROUGH the last whips of the storm's hair, the breezes fluffing her red robes behind her in the darkness, tickling her pretty face and dancing across the sleekness of her body. She stirred the air with her passage, making the thunder to go mute and the lightning to lose its ferocity so that they would not alert her prey to her coming. She alighted in a small copse to the left of the spot where the man and the dragon lay sleeping, head to head, the man with his feet braced against an outcropping of stone. Dropping to her hands and knees, she wound her way through the brush until she had reached a point from which she could watch her prey unobserved. They both were sleeping soundly only fifty feet from the lip of the gorge.

The man's face was turned toward her, and she could not help but marvel at the blonde mane and the way it fell so much

like the mane of a wild animal, the way it framed his square, handsome face, his thin and cruel, yet somehow beautiful lips.

She shook herself back into hatred, casting out the sentimentality.

He had used her!

She shifted her weight from one knee to the other, squinted her eyes, and mumbled the proper phrases to enact her Talents and get her magics into operation. She could not affect him directly, for she had tried and failed. Though he was not a Talented, he was somehow immune to her Talents. But perhaps she could stir the elements and affect him indirectly . . .

She reached out and grasped the air with her Talents, toying with it, getting the feel of it, letting it run through her mental fingers and wet her mental palms. The air washed her. She lifted her real arms and hands to it in supplication and in demand. It threaded her fingers and wrapped into eddying pools in the cups of her hands.

The wind babbled to her.

The wind obeyed her.

She caused the air to grow heavy above her head, to pile and pile on dark layer after dark layer, to compress into the small volume of space. Then, gently nudging it with her magics, she began to shuffle the layers, mixing and shuffling, making the wind ever stronger. Still, she contained it. She used some more of her magics to build a shield about it so that it could go nowhere, so that the pressure it was building was contained. The pools of air howled above her head, rubbing against one another, and she was forced to shush them lest they awaken her prey. When the pressure had reached a safety maximum and would any moment leap out of control and swallow her like the

explosion of a bomb, she directed it at the man that slept only fifty feet from the brink of death.

The wind screamed again, whipping away from her and skittering across the ground toward the supine form.

Jake woke to the howling and started to raise his head.

The wind hit him then, jerking him upright and off his feet. It swirled about him, raising a dust cloud that all but obscured him from her view. It lifted him off the ground and twirled him higher, higher still until he was twenty feet above the ground.

She stood and came from the cover of the copse, laughing. Her dark hair flew about her head as her robes slipped tightly around her shapely body, clung to her, molded to her. Her green eyes flashed beligerance and triumph. "I couldn't touch you!" she shouted above the howling. "But the wind I made will carry you away."

He looked about, searching the darkness in hopes of catching sight of her.

With another part of her mind, she lit the area around them like daylight so that he could watch her in his last moments, could see that it was truly she who gained revenge.

The dragon stirred and lumbered to its feet. It moaned in panic and stumbled back and forth a moment before finally deciding to stay still and wait out the horror.

"Let me do vn!" Jake bellowed, his hair wild and teased.

"Like you let me go when you had me where you wanted me?"

"Oh for crissakes!"

"What?"

He spun about, whirling and tumbling as she maintained the shuffling of the layers of air, continually building the

pressure needed to hold his hundred and eighty pounds.

"What did you say?" she asked, thinking the strange word might be a charm to undo her magics.

"That was a deity of my world," he snapped. "Now let me down!"

"Like for like!" she snapped back, laughing a forced laugh.

"Like hell! You enjoyed what I did to you back there."

The light she had created dimmed as if in a blush. "I did not!"

"You cooperated."

"You might have killed me."

"And why do you wear the kind of clothes you wear?" he asked, tumbling.

The dragon turned its head from one to the other as if watching a tennis match.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"That dress."

He tumbled, fell, bobbled in the wind, circling twenty—now twenty-five feet over her head.

"What about this dress?" she called.

"You must wear it just to tease the local Common boys."

"Why, you—"

She stamped her foot.

"Vee necks show off your figure well, my dear, but they aren't modest, and there is absolutely no sense in trying to pretend they are."

She put her hands to the neckline of her robe, drawing the halves together over her ripe breasts. She stamped her foot again.

"And those slits up the side—" he continued.

She pulled her shapely leg back into the concealing folds of the robe and dropped her hands to hold the slits shut. But the vee neck opened again, revealing the soft halves of her moon-like breasts, smooth and lovely in the artificial psi-light.

"You wanted me to do what I did," he

said again.

She grabbed the wind with her mind, reached her arms out to it. She stirred it into greater fury. She spat into the wind, and the wind carried her spittle and splattered it over Jake's cheek. He cursed her. She made the winds to shriek and howl. She made the winds to lift him and carry him close to the edge of the ravine. Stacking and shuffling the layers like cards, she pushed him beyond the brink, left him dangling over nothingness . . .

"Now," she said, "I will diminish the winds."

But at that moment, the dragon moved out of its obscurity and craned its neck over the edge of the gorge, swung it directly in front of Jake. Jake grabbed hold of that thick, long trunk and held on as the wind was cut from under him. The dragon swung its head around, bringing him back onto solid ground once again.

She reached quickly into the air and began stacking layers of it over her head in hopes of creating a second wind that would carry her prey away far more speedily, long before the cunning dragon could think to rescue him.

But he was running for her.

She backed away from him, stacking the wind.

But he was coming too fast . . .

She would have to leave and come back later to mount her second offensive.

She lifted into the air.

And he clutched at her bare feet! Held her! Pulled her down!

She struggled, kicking and hitting and clawing since her magics were no good against him. But he held on, taking her punishment and slowly exerting more and more force to tame her. He was such a powerful man, his arms like cords of wood, his muscles like knotted lengths of steel. He pulled her onto the ground with

him, dragging her across his lap. Lifting her robes to bare her smooth and lovely cheeks, he began spanking her.

"Stop it!" she shouted.

He spanked her again.

She caused lightning to strike the peak of his burly head, but her powers were useless against him. The bolt dissipated into brilliant sparks and did not harm him.

He slapped her harder, stinging her with his heavy palm.

She caused a shower of sharp-toothed rodents to descend upon him, but the rodents fled and did not attempt to gnaw his flesh.

She brought heavy rain, but he did not get wet.

She brought hail.

He was not bruised.

He spanked her harder, harder still.

She began to cry.

"Who gave you your immunity?" she howled.

"The Sorceress Kell, a stronger Talented than you," he grinned, slapping her buttocks again.

She caused boulders to drop upon his head.

The boulders turned to dust and blew away.

"That old bitch!" she moaned of Kell.

"She is a good woman, a good sorceress," he corrected her, slapping her reddened flesh even harder. "She is wise and all-knowing, not just a temperamental, Talented little snot!"

Finally she realized that fighting only brought on more spanking. She went limp and did not try to harm him either with her magics or her feet and hands. When he saw that she was out of reserves and that she had surrendered, he stood, dropping her into the dust, letting her go. She jumped to her feet, spat at him, lifted

into the air and sailed quickly out of his reach, constantly muttering the vilest threats she could summon from her throat to her lips.

He stood, laughing.

She hurried away into the wind, lost in the darkness, shrieking curses to the four corners of the night . . .

Chapter Four: INTO LELAR

THE DAWN CAME with a million fingers and pried away with golden nails until the darkness had been levered out of sight. The sky slipped from ebony to amber and from amber to green. The green soon was streaked through with blue. The blue came to dominate and the day was then completely upon them.

Jake ate breakfast from his knapsack, feasting on the fruits and dried meats that Kell had prepared and packed for him, washing down the cheese and tough, dry bread with short swigs of sweet wine from his canvas canteen. Kaliglia satisfied himself with devouring half the copse in which Cheryn the witch had hidden the night before.

"I should thank you for saving my life," Jake said after finishing his meal.

The beast turned to face him, a small berry bush half-munched in its great maw. It chewed for a few moments, accompanied by crunching and crackling as the bush gave way to its relentless square teeth, then swallowed noisily. Its neck rippled as the remnants of the bush shoved down and into the dragon's stomach. "Oh, that's all right. Hardly means anything anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you insist on going into Lelar—"

"That again!"

"—then I'm afraid your life will be taken sooner or later anyway."

"You do have a one track mind."

"When it comes to Lelar, yes."

"For the last time, Kaliglia, the strange hole in Lelar's castle wall could be the link between probability lines that I need. Kell has seen it only once, but even she made the connection when I told her of my story. I must find that portal. I must return home. It is too difficult for me to accept a world where Talented rule supreme and where I will never have any hope of becoming anything because I was not born a mutated superman."

"Well, I think it's foolish."

Jake stood and threw his knapsack over his shoulders. He approached the beast, wagging a finger. "Look, are you going to serve me or not?"

"Well—"

The dragon tore the leaves off another shrub, munched on them.

"The Sorceress Kell did not tell me you were a coward."

"Coward?"

"So it would appear to me."

"I'm just not foolhardy, is all. I like to think things out before I go running around brainless, asking for trouble. I like to think things out."

"Damn it, so do I. I've thought. I must go to the castle of Lelar in hopes that the hole in the wall is a portal back into my own probability line, a door warped open by the nuclear war—since the castle was built on the sight of a major blast, built to encompass the shimmering spot in the air that had drawn Lelar's attention and was mistaken, at first, for a powerful talisman. There are stories of people disappearing from my world. Perhaps they disappeared into the analog of this

hole in Lelar's wall."

"And they never came out here. You are the first of your kind to have come to this place. Have you ever thought about that?"

"Yes."

"And you still want to go on?"

"Yes."

"Then you are most assuredly a fool."

Jake turned and walked off toward the bridge.

The dragon watched him until he had set foot upon it. "Hey," Kaliglia called at last, "where are you going?"

"I may be a fool, but I am no coward, Kaliglia of the Faint Heart."

The dragon snorted and tossed its head. It lumbered away from the copse and up to the wide spanse of stone that linked the two sides of the gorge. "Get on."

"You're coming with me?"

"I never said I was a coward. You did."

Jake rounded the massive front legs and clambored up the thick-scaled side, mounting the horn of the natural saddle. "I apologize."

Kaliglia snorted.

The beast marched forward onto the stone after only the briefest of hesitations, waddling step after step across the gorge. On both sides, the possible fall was tremendous and ended not with a floor of flat rock—which would have been bad enough and deadly enough—but in a jumble of broken stones whose pointed ends would make fast mincemeat of anything dropped from the bridge.

Still, they crossed without incident, reaching the solid ground on the other side without even a single close call or slipped foot. Kaliglia stopped, sighing heavily now that he was sure disaster was about to be theirs. Jake slid down and put hand to eyes to ward off the bright sun, searching the way ahead. A hundred feet

on, a thick forest of what appeared to be elm trees stood sentinel over the foothills and the mountains beyond. The way through the woods would be rough, and Kaliglia would have to squeeze through here and there, but there could be no turning back now.

Kaliglia moaned slightly. "The woods are dark."

"See," Jake said, turning back to his mammoth companion. "I told you we would not be greeted with evil incarnate upon setting foot in Lelar. No kingdom is any more evil than others. This place has as much sunshine and fresh air as we had on the other side of the gorge."

Kaliglia snorted, started to answer, but was cut short by a sharp screaming and the flapping of leathery wings . . .

Something dark and solid struck Jake across the chest like a lightning bolt left over from the previous evening's storm, barreling him backwards, head over heels on the hard earth. He rolled sideways, cracking his skull on the hard earth. His ears rang as if a thousand bells were playing in syncopated time. His vision turned to globs of light without shape—globs of light that spun around and around, up and down, from corner to corner of his eyeballs. He tried to force himself to clear up the jumble of light and see straight, but it was not an easy thing . . .

Abruptly, he was aware of a sharp-tongued fire burning in his sides, bursting up through his chest. He felt the warm flow of blood—his own blood—soaking his ragged shirt. With an extra burst of adrenalin, he was able to clear his vision. When he saw what hung before him, he almost wished he had been able to retain the blurred world where shapes and characteristics were unknown. The thing on him was a demon for sure. The face

was partly human, but the majority of it had been given over to Nature to play around with in one of her more drunken spells, and she had played quite imaginatively. The broad forehead jutted imposingly out over two narrow, slitted, and deepset black eyes. There was no white at all to those eyes, just blackness from edge to edge. A deflated nose split the eyes and dropped down the middle of the face, a nose without cartilage, so that it almost did not exist—save for a slight depression in the skin and two ragged nostrils where that ended. Below the nose, just after a short, thin upper lip, was a mouth crammed full of canine teeth that snarled and tangled one another and a purple, darting tongue.

Jake felt claws against his flesh again, realized the demon was laughing at his weakness. He sucked in breath, shivered from toe to scap, coughed on the fetid odor of the beast's breath, and kicked upward with all of his might, using his body as a lever between earth and demon. The demon was not particularly heavily built, and Jake flung it aside with little trouble. Had he reacted sooner, he might have saved himself the slashes from the foot claws of the beast, for he was obviously the physical superior to it. He could see now that it was about the size of a twelve year old boy and flaunted a pair of leathery wings that stretched from its deformed and withered arms and attached to the flesh at its sides, giving it the look of a bat—a weird, mutated, manbat. It rolled to its feet where he had thrown it and stood facing him, hissing between its rows of razor teeth, dancing irritately back and forth on clawed feet so that the claws clicking against the hard earth made the sound of castanets. The end of each wing and withered arm was also tipped with four claws on the end of

four emaciated, nearly all-bone fingers.

Jake remembered the knife in his knapsack. Kell had given it to him with the warning that he might find it necessary in Lelar. But this world had proved so singularly peaceful up until now that he had carelessly left it with the food and the wine. He backed toward the sack where it had been thrown in the first moments of the battle. If he could reach it and grab the knife, he would be on more equal footing with the demon.

The manbat, however, seeing the direction in which he edged and apparently grasping some of the import of his retreat, leaped into the air, cawing madly, and threw itself upon him once again, digging knife-like claws into his shoulders and bearing him to the earth in a flutter of leathery wings.

Jake smashed a fist upward and felt flesh give before it. It was an altogether satisfying feeling under the circumstances. Blood burst out of the creature's shriveled nose, a rich, scarlet blood. It splattered across his face, warming him where it touched, exciting him. He drove the fist back again, skidded it over the manbat's cheek, slashing his floppy ear along the edge so that blood leaked out there too.

The manbat loosened its grip and flopped off him, staggering back a few paces to assess its wounds. It hissed, wiped a wing across its battered face, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

The knapsack lay behind.

The fight had advanced.

The knapsack lay too far behind to reach in time.

Jake didn't wait for the enemy to decide upon a course of action. He acted first. He rushed it, leapt upon it before it could completely judge the meaning of his movements. He throttled it to the ground,

hands laced about its skinny neck, choking it, firmly pinning its shoulders with his knees. It screamed, frothing blood and saliva about its yellowed teeth. It twisted its neck, trying to snap at his wrists, but he held it too solidly, his grip strengthened by panic, and it could not gain its freedom that way. It writhed under him, furious for a means of escape, finally throwing its feet up and clutching at his sides with the terrible, sharp claws. Again he felt the nails bite into his flesh and twist left, right, left. Again, he began to seep blood. But then his hands had done their work. The thin throat suddenly crushed inward upon itself. Blood bubbled out of the beast's mouth and over Jake's hands, bathing his fingers in gore.

But panic still coursed through his fingers, charging them with jerking, electric power. Still he throttled it, unwilling to cease until the panic had drained from him and the demon was dead beyond doubt. He could feel the sharp points of broken bones punching through the thing's flesh, and he could see the blood streaming from its mouth and nostrils, but he wanted to give it no chance, and he wanted to let it suck the horror from him, as if the contact of his hands about its neck could do just that. A madness filled him that bordered on hysteria. When he had finished and the madness was nearly gone, he had almost wrung the manbat's neck free of its shoulders.

He stood, trembling, wiping his stained hands over his jeans. He ached in every muscle from the exertion of the battle, but there were other, more serious, aches that were wounds. He caught hold of his head as it threatened to go dancing again, stopped the spinning lights. He staggered to his knapsack and plopped down next to

it, stripping off his shirt and examining the wounds—two small ones in his shoulders that had already ceased to bleed, and several longer, more active cuts on his sides where the claws had raked him. Still, the cuts were relatively clean. The demon had had little chance to work at and worry them into raggedness.

"Are you all right?" Kaliglia asked, lumbering close to him and clucking his mammoth tongue in sympathy this time, not in admonition.

He shook his head, anxious now only to suck the air and replenish his dried and aching lungs.

"I warned you of Lelar."

"What—" His lack of breath denied him words. He sat sucking air for a while longer until the dizziness went away and his throat felt less constricted. "What was that?"

"A manbat. Lelar uses them to guard his castle walls, but I had not thought to warn you of them, for they never appear this far from the castle itself. It is a very strange thing to find one here."

"His army, then?"

"More or less."

"I'm afraid of infection," Jake said, tenderly touching his wounds, spreading the lips of the cuts and watching the clean blood well out to wash away as much dirt as possible.

"Some of the wine—" the dragon suggested.

But before he could finish, the flapping of wings stirred them to look at the sky. Six of the leathery predators were sweeping in over the trees. They hardly moved their wings at all, but seemed mostly to glide on the air currents, flapping only to gain height once they had swirled too low. They swept toward the dragon and the man, gliding now. Shriill cries of hatred scored the air as they saw

the body of their fallen comrade, cries as bitter and chill as a sharp January wind carrying whispers of ice and sleet and snow.

Jake fumbled in his knapsack and brought out the long-bladed knife that Kell had given him. It was a beautiful piece of workmanship, the blade and handle all of one piece of metal, the handle beset with pieces of semi-precious stones in a double ring around the base of the hilt. But he was not thinking of beauty at the moment, not with ugliness circling so close overhead. He tested the blade against his thumb, found that it was very sharp indeed. He pushed to his feet and addressed Kaliglia, keeping his eyes on the winged demons above. "I'll stand with my back to you. They can only come at me from one direction, then."

"Good," the dragon said, nodding his mammoth head, swaying his serpentine neck to follow the flight of the manbats.

Then the first of the soldier bats dropped, whining in at him like a bullet, fluffing its wings at the last second to slow its wicked descent. Moving as quickly as his strained muscles would allow, Jake fell into a crouch, holding the knife between his knees with both hands, the blade directed outward. When the manbat was almost on him, he swept the blade upwards in an arc, ending with it held back over his head. It sliced through the manbat's chest, spilling its blood and guts across his feet. The thing gave a feeble chitter and collapsed on him, limp. He shoved it backward, kicked it out of the way with his foot, and turned to watch the remaining five as they circled above, black-black eyes glittering insanely like pools of night let loose here in the morning sunshine.

"Good," Kaliglia said, urging him on. The big beast was too large for this sort of

close-quarters fighting and could serve only as a wall of protection for his comrade.

A second manbat dropped, more careful than the first. It landed a dozen feet in front of him and stood hissing at him, flapping its wings furiously without lifting from the ground, obviously trying to throw fear into him—more fear than already bubbled wildly through his veins.

As it stood facing him, he was able to note, for the first time, that about its right leg was a small, black band emblazoned with a brilliant orange crescent—most likely the colors and symbol of the House of Lelar. If one of King Lelar's manbats was an oddity this far from the castle, then what could it mean to find seven of them—and perhaps more as yet unseen—so close to the ravine? But that was not a question to worry over now. Now he must only watch the manbat in hopes of determining when it would—

—Leap!

He raised an arm, smashing against its outflung claws and legs, throwing it backwards. The impact would have knocked him from his feet too, had he not the solid flank of the dragon to rest upon. The manbat tumbled away, scrambled to its feet again, hissing at him, eyes blazing dark flames. Saliva dripped over its glittering yellow teeth.

He fingered his knife, held it before him and waved it at the manbat. The beast only hissed contemptuously and danced lightly on its clawed feet, waiting for an opening.

There was a sudden flapping from above as another bat dived.

He brought the knife up as before, splitting the diving manbat's stomach and knocking it aside. But in the short time his attention had been diverted to

meet that more immediate danger, the first manbat had crossed the space between them and was on him, screaming its triumph to the circling congregation overhead who echoed it back, sharing their comrade's joy at victory.

The demon had overestimated its leap, however, and though striking him with one foot, overshot and smashed the left foot into the flank of the dragon. The blow had been hard, for the manbat had crippled itself, also snapping off two of the four claws on the foot and bending the entire chief joint into a crazy angle. While it was bringing the good claw around for a try at his neck, Jake jabbed the knife out, felt it crunch through facial tissue and cartilage—the light creatures seemed to have almost no bone as such—with a sickening gurgling noise. Blood fountained up around the hilt. He had caught the beast directly below the right eye, and the stab had been instantly fatal. He pulled the blade out, kicked the beast's body aside, and stood, swaying against the dragon.

Another manbat dived.

Jake brought his arms around, positioning the knife between his knees for the defensive swipe, but deep inside his body told him he could not adequately respond to another challenge so soon after the last battle. He was doomed, his aching arms weakened too much to move quickly enough . . .

Suddenly the air was rent with a violent scream as Kaliglia shot his neck out, opened his enormous maw, and snapped the manbat right out of the air, crushing it between his vegetarian's teeth and dropping it to the ground. It wriggled for a moment, all broken, and finally lay still.

"Congratulations," Jake wheezed, gathering his breath.

"We have to work together if together we wish to survive."

"Wise sayings yet?"

"A Truth."

"What happened to your cowardice?"

"You were the one who said I was cowardly, not I."

"I apologize again."

The great dragon sniffed haughtily and turned to regard the two remaining manbats that drifted cautiously out of reach of his slender neck and round, blunt crushing teeth.

The two manbats circled for a time, flapping whenever they came down too close to the dragon. Finally, the smaller of the two detached itself from the bare remnants of the formation and streaked back over the trees, cawing noisily. The first still flew above, eyeing the two ground creatures with distaste. It too, Jake could see now, bore the insignia of the House of Lelar, the black leg band and the orange crescent.

It seemed that they stood a long time, waiting for the remaining demon to make a move. Then, just as Jake was about to suggest they move on and to hell with it, the air was filled with the reverberation of beating wings . . .

"Oh, no," he heard himself mutter.

The dragon muttered something equally appropriate.

They watched the trees . . .

Waiting . . .

A dozen manbats came over the treetops, joining the lone sentinel that had kept guard over the two ground creatures for them. For many minutes, the group circled as a unit, evidently discussing the best way to attack. Perhaps five minutes later, a pair of bats detached themselves from the flight pattern and dropped like stones toward Jake where he stood backed against his

companion's meaty thigh.

Kaliglia snapped at the nearest, tore its left wing off. It plummeted to the ground and lay screaming and writhing.

The second passed the mammoth jaws unharmed and swooped in on Jake. The man held the stance that had proven successful before, slightly crouched with the knife in both hands between his knees. At the last possible second, he gutted the demon, sweeping upward with the blade as its claws touched him, tossing it backwards into death . . .

Above, the eleven remaining beasts seemed to go into consultation, swarming together and chittering furiously, now and then pausing to eye the man with his back against the dragon and the dragon with his long neck swaying back and forth, back and forth like some tremendous and deadly snake come alive on his shoulders.

"They almost seem to be planning their strategy," Jake heard himself saying. It sounded like a stranger's voice, distant and strained and very unreal. He was so very tired. His eyes fluttered to close, and he had to force them open by biting on his lower lip until the pain brought him fully awake. He tasted a thin stream of his own blood.

"They probably are," the dragon answered, clearing its throat with a base rumbling that shook its flank where Jake leaned.

The response rattled him. "You mean they're intelligent?"

"Somewhat."

"What does that mean?" His voice was so small and hoarse that he wondered Kaliglia could understand it so readily.

"They aren't as intelligent as you or I, but they have the cunning and basic vocabulary—in their own strange tongue—of a child of six or seven."

"And the blood lust of a thousand year old soldier!"

"Perhaps."

"What will they do?"

Kaliglia snorted again. "Whatever it is, it will not be pleasant."

"I think you were right," Jake said grudgingly.

"About what?"

"About Lelar."

"What an awful time to have to waste the pleasure of saying I told you so."

And the manbats dived.

Six of them together.

They had devised a shrewd strategy indeed.

Down . . .

Kaliglia bit at one, spat it out demolished. He swung his long neck and struck at another, ripping it apart with a violent jerk of his jaws. It did not even have time to scream. But the four others got by the wicked jaws and swooped in on Jake. Backed as he was against the flank of the huge reptile, only two could squeeze in to approach him at once—and squeezed as they were, he slashed from the left to the right with his knife before they could reach him. Left to the right—then back again, hacking their faces. Back and forth, driving them backwards until they fell, screaming and wiping blood from their ruined eyes. The next two danced in, one behind the other, having learned from the fate of the two that had gone before them. Their purpose was to hit him so closely that he could not swing fast enough to take them in close succession. Three more dived. Kaliglia got one.

The first manbat chittered loudly in a savagewarwhoop, lifted itself with beating wings, raked claws down Jake's cheeks. Blood sprang up in rivers inside and outside his mouth. He staggered, slid

down the dragon's flank. The second manbat swept in and was upon him. He swiped feebly at it with his knife, but all his strength had left him. His arms ached and seemed to weigh nearly a ton apiece. His face was aflame with unbearable flame, and he could just swallow the blood as fast as it poured into his mouth from his damaged face. The manbat screamed wildly with knowledge of its success and swiped claws at his glazed eyes . . .

And was Gone . . .
Gone!

He sat waiting for the blindness to strike him, for the darkness to flash permanently across his sight. But the day went on, void of manbats. He sat for a moment, unable to believe that they had disappeared without killing him, that they were gone and he was, temporarily at least, safe. Then, weakly, supporting himself against Kaliglia's side, he got to his feet. His knees wobbled and threatened to buckle, but he steadied himself, determined to witness whatever miracle had transpired.

The sky was free of manbats.

The bodies that had littered the earth were gone.

Only the Crimson Witch floated in the sky.

"You," he croaked, his cheeks surging blood more strongly.

"Me," she affirmed from her lofty perch on nothingness.

"But why?"

"I wanted you for myself. I want to kill you."

He couldn't help himself. He laughed, was suddenly conscious of the blood thick in his mouth, and toppled forward into darkness . . .

Chapter Five: THE CRIMSON WITCH

SHE STRETCHED the man out on the ground, shooing the dragon away despite its protests that it might be of some assistance. She lifted his lids, felt his pulse, listened to the beat of his weakened heart. She wiped the blood away from his cheeks with the hem of her robe and examined the claw cuts there. They were deep, completely through the flesh so that she could pull apart the edges and see into his mouth. The flow of blood must soon be staunched, or he would die. She reached out with her mental fingers and found, to her surprise, that Kell had built his defenses against only aggressive magics. Talents used to heal or help him would work on him. She was suddenly angry with that old bitch Kell, and she snorted her contempt.

Almost, she stood and left to let him bleed to death. But then her hands were trailing over the ruin of his face, and she was remembering what he had looked like, how like she pictured a god would look come down fresh from the holy mountains. The cuts began to heal even as she thought. When she realized what she had begun, she stopped with a start, then shrugged and continued the process. Slowly but visibly, the flesh sealed together and the flow of blood ceased. The scar tissue formed, remained and hardened for a few minutes, then peeled and fell away. Where the cuts had been, there was only soft, pink flesh. Still, she concentrated until the new skin blended perfectly with the old and the face was as handsome as she remembered it.

Carefully, she stripped off the remnants of the clawed and torn shirt and examined his other wounds. She

marveled once more at the smooth muscles of his delightful body . . .

She shook her head free of such thoughts and concentrated on healing that body. Healing it, nothing more . . .

When this was done, she reached into his mind and planted the seeds of wakefulness so that he stirred and fluttered his eyes and looked up full into her face, locking his eyes on her green-green eyes. His gaze became fear-filled, then suddenly changed, melted into a gaze of curiosity. He raised his hands slowly and felt along his jaw line, ran his fingers over his cheeks, marveling at the smoothness of them. He dropped his hands to his sides, probed with his fingers for the places he had been slashed, realizing that they were completely gone, removed without the faintest trace. "How—?"

"I healed you," she said contemptuously.

"But I thought—"

"Kell is a wise old witch. She made you immune to magics that are meant to harm you while leaving you perfectly open to magics that are to help and heal you."

"And you healed me so that you might kill me later?" He grinned.

She snorted.

"Well?"

"Yes!"

He grinned again, sat up. "Well, kill me then."

She looked at him, shrugged. "Later."

"No. Now."

She stood.

He stood. "Now," he said, opening his arms to her.

She backed away.

He approached her. "Kill me now if you're so anxious for the pleasure."

She started to levitate.

He ran forward, grabbed her ankles and towed her out of the sky. "No you don't! You aren't running away again—just to come and make more trouble whenever your temper gets hot again."

"You were almost dead," she said in a tiny voice.

"Well, then kill me. Finish the job they started."

He tugged her against him.

"No," she said.

"I'll spank you then."

"Please don't."

"I will!"

"Please!"

"Then kill me."

"I can't."

She was crying now.

"Why not?"

"Because—"

"Because?"

"Because—"

"Because?"

"Because I love you, damn it!"

She kicked him in the shin.

He opened his mouth, recovered slightly, closed it, still astonished.

She kicked him again. "Let me go!"

"What did you say?"

"You heard it, damn you!" She mumbled a curse at him.

"I want to hear it once more."

He squeezed her arms.

Behind, Kaliglia rumbled to remind them of his presence.

"I love you, you over-bearing bastard!"

"But—"

"Oh, shut up!"

She kicked him again.

"What are you kicking me for?"

"To make you let me go."

He held her tighter.

Kaliglia grumbled again, turned his back.

"Let me—go!"

He kissed her.

She kicked his shin one last time. Then she kissed him too, holding him tightly, crying and kissing and trembling against him.

Kaliglia walked off toward the woods, hanging his head between a couple of trees and examining the way they would soon have to tread. If they were still going to the Castle Lelar, that was.

Jake touched the double clasp that held her crimson robe about her.

She kissed him.

He kissed back.

The robe slipped away, and the sun was dimmed by a greater light.

Kaliglia began humming a tune the Sorceress Kell sang a great deal, drowning out all other noises behind . . .

Chapter Six: A JOINING OF FORCES

KALIGLIA, after a discreet amount of time and after the noises of love no longer required his song to mask them, returned from his vigil of the forest floor and lay down next to them where they sat at the scene of the battle and the curing and the love-making, discussing strategy. After the preliminaries of the discussion had been passed and the embarrassment of all had been relieved quite quickly by Jake's open mood, Kaliglia and Cheryn agreed that the first manbat had most likely attacked out of sheer meanness, anxious for sport and lusting for the taste and smell of human blood. When Jake had slaughtered the first and Kaliglia and he had dispatched of most of the second wave, the creatures had grown frightened and—perhaps more important and more deadly—maddened for revenge and had

gone to get comrades to finish him off—not counting on an intervening witch and her powerful magics to put a stop to their violence.

"Manbats are not Talented," Cheryn said, lacing her fingers, pulling her knees between her arms, and resting her delicate chin upon her knees. "They're only Mues, mutants, twisted creatures warped by the Hidden Flames of the Great Fire. Something like Kaliglia here. Oh, we had his sort of dragon-lizard before, but not one with the ability to talk. Still, he cannot use magics, and neither can the manbats."

"But when the manbat went to summon aid," Jake said, "he didn't go very far. He slipped away and was out of our sight no more than a few minutes. Certainly it would take him longer than that to reach Castle Lelar and gather fighting comrades."

"Yes," she agreed, shaking her head so that her long, black hair tumbled over her shoulders, shook against the sweet curve of her breasts where they bulged against her brilliant robe. "Yes, that is true enough. It raises other possibilities for answers. Chiefly, it indicates that there is a detachment of manbats somewhere within the neighborhood. What size that detachment is could be a serious question that could impede our progress. It would be wise to move forward slowly—and to begin moving relatively soon before the others—if there are others, perhaps we defeated the entire detachment—discover the missing demons and set out searching for them."

"But why," Kaliglia asked perplexedly, "would there be so many demons so far from the castle walls? They only patrol the castle and the city, not the open plains."

"We may never discover the answer to

that—if we're lucky," Cheryn said, shivering and drawing her arms tighter about her.

"You're afraid of them?" Jake asked, remembering how she had ashed them in one fell swoop, leaving no traces of their fiendish corpses or of the corpses of those he had already killed.

"I am afraid of anything that is Lelar's. He is a powerful Sorcerer."

"He's Talented?"

"Of course. Who but a Talented could become a king?"

"Let's go, then."

"Wait," she said, scrunching her bare toes on the hard-packed ground, digging her toenails in and making little lines about her feet.

"What is it?"

"What are you seeking in Lelar? You have not yet said."

He hesitated, his mind unsure of what he should let his tongue say. He had yet to feel he could really trust anyone here but Kell, for only Kell had done for him a thing that was helpful and protective. No. No, that was not altogether so. This witch before him had done something for him that had no harm in it and was protective in a way. And this second time, it had been of her volition; there was no question of rape. He let his eyes roam over her, devouring her fair face, her flowing midnight locks, the ample curves of her woman's body, the slender lines of her calves and ankles where they slid from beneath the robe. Finally, he nodded his head as much to himself as to her and got up, scrounging around for a stick, returning to sit next to her when he had found one of suitable length and thickness. He began drawing a line on the dust coat of the earth. "This is the world I come from," he said, indicating the line. "Imagine everything that happens

there—all the lives and places and things and events and thoughts and hopes and dreams—summed up in this line. Okay?"

"In just a line?"

"Yes. Look, the farther the line goes, the more modern the era it represents. Any dot on it is a year. The longer I draw it, the more ancient the beginning of it becomes. The moving point always represents the present. The undisturbed dust before the stick is the future."

"I understand."

Kaliglia grumbled, strained his neck over both of them and watched the stick with interest.

Jake looked to the girl and the dragon, and seeing that they really did grasp his analogy, he continued. "At some point in history, this worldline split into two world lines. As time went on, your world developed more rapidly than did mine. Your people discovered atomic energy long before my people did. The worlds had split, and yours rushed toward modernity faster than mine. But yours also rushed toward something else, something darker." He drew a fork in the line and continued each branch for a distance to show what it was he meant. "This branch represents my world," he said, indicating the nearer. "And this other is yours." He marked a large X on her worldline. "About here, your people had an all-out atomic war, nuclear holocaust."

"Nuclear war?" She looked puzzled.

"You call it the Great Fire."

"Oh, yes! I remember that they were the same now. But it has been a long time since we have used the more mystical term. We now call it the Great Fire and are done with it."

"That's because you've forgotten what 'nuclear' means."

"I— Yes, that is so."

Kaliglia cleared his throat, sighed, anxious for the explanation to continue.

"Well, I won't go into the meaning of 'nuclear'. If that has been lost, there are too many basics to cover before any real understanding could be given you. But you see now that I came from this first worldline into yours."

"But how did you cross the gap between them?"

"Through the use of a drug called PBT."

"That is?"

"A psychic chemical that works on the mind. Synthetic chemical. Somehow, the overdose I took gave me the psionic ability to open a pathway between the worldlines, gave me a means of bridging that gap so that I merely had to step through a crack in the wall to enter your world. But I ended up here without the power to return to my own line. Stranded."

"And what has this to do with Lelar?"

"In Castle Lelar—"

"You plan to go inside?" she asked, obviously with utter disbelief.

"He sure enough does," Kaliglia confirmed, nodding his head and clucking his tongue so that the air reverberated with a drum-like pounding.

"But—"

"Please," Jake said, "don't try to dissuade me. I'm determined that I am going back to my worldline. I need the portal in the Castle Lelar. If it is what I believe it is, I think it will take me back."

"Portal?"

"There is a place in the wall of the throne chamber in Castle Lelar, a place where men can be pushed through into apparent nothingness, as if great spaces, universes, existed between the bricks and the outside. It may, just may, be a link to my world. What little I know of it makes

it seem worth a try. It's all I have."

She looked thoughtful. She looked beautiful. "Lelar is an evil old man."

"I am going anyway, despite his orange crescent and his manbats."

"And there are far more manbats in the capital city than we have yet faced. Thousands more."

"I can't be convinced to give it up." Even so, he could feel the clutching claws of hundreds of demons, the bared fangs raking his chest, the hot, heavy, ugly breath steaming in his face . . .

"He's bullheaded," Kaliglia assured her.

Cheryn seemed not to notice the beast's remark. She pursed her lips, considering the dangers, thinking best how to outline them for her lover. "And there will be other things. Things that crawl. Things that slither. Things with claws in their mouths and teeth on their tails so that outside seems inside and inside seems outside when you have to fight one. Lelar will summon every sort of Mue to challenge us before he lets us breach his sacred walls."

"But why should he? I had planned merely on asking him to let me try it, volunteering to go through his portal for him—since he seems anxious to experiment with other people's bodies."

"You can't do that!"

Jake frowned and snapped the drawing stick between his fingers. "And why not?"

"First of all, Lelar will torture you to find out how you came to know of the hole in the wall. I doubt that it is common knowledge within the city. Secondly, he will torture you to discover your motive. He will not be so foolish as to think that someone would volunteer without motive for what, to anyone else, would be a horrid adventure. He will discover the truth about the portal. If it is a doorway

to your worldline, he will know."

"I can stand torture, if it means he will eventually stuff me into the damn hole!"

"Let me finish," she protested, thrusting her pretty lips into a pout.

"Go on."

"And when he discovers that there is another world beyond—if you are correct in your assumptions—do you think he won't want to conquer a piece of it for his kingdom? He is a vain old man. Knowing a world lay untouched by his power would be too much for him."

Jake laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Yeah," Kaliglia questioned too. "What?"

"It's just that neither of you understand my world," Jake said, standing and waving his arms wide. "It's big. Damn big. Bigger, by far, than that old fart Lelar. So big it could swallow him up. It would gobble him whole in less than a day, and he would be lost and afraid and no threat at all. My world is much like what your world must have been before the nuclear war here. The cities number in the millions, not in the thousands. Your castles would fit into the lobbies of our largest buildings. On our highways, there are great chemical-eating dragons, some larger than Kaliglia, that prow! all hours of the day and night, mechanical dragons built by the people of my world, tamed by them. Lelar would be the little fish in the big pond, and he wouldn't last."

"Tell me something," Cheryn said, eyeing him wisely.

"What?"

"Do they have Talented in your world?"

"My God, no! That's what's so wonderful about it. In my worldline, a man doesn't spend his entire life

suppressed and oppressed by witches and warlocks and sorcerors!"

"Then your world would fall to Lelar."

"Huh?"

"Imagine a Talented set loose in your world, hiding and unknown. Imagine a man set loose in your world who could control the weather, bringing great floods, great blizzards, hurricanes, hail storms. A man who can maneuver matter with his mind, moving it where he wants it as quickly as he wants, a man who could cause the earth itself to shift beneath your cities and tumble them into ruins. A man who can even work to bend another man's will somewhat. A man who—it has been rumored among the Talented for some time now, rumored by those least given to deceit—can, when his powers are at a peak, even read the basic thoughts of another man. He's the only mind reader ever reported among the Talented—a formidable power even if an erratic and weak one. What could such a man accomplish in your world?"

Jake sobered. He felt his dreams crashing down inside his head, and his skull ached from the mortar of hope showering up in chips and clouds. "Well—"

"Wouldn't he eventually rule?"

"They have great weapons in my world—"

"He can deflect them."

"Fire—"

"Will roll off him like water, leave him unscathed."

Jake sank down on the ground once more, sucking a tooth and rubbing his scraggly beard, pushing fingers through his copious fall of hair. "I see the picture. Big and clear. And I don't like it at all. He *could* take over. Easily."

"So you can't just approach him and volunteer to go through the wall. He

mustn't suspect that you are interested in the wall in any way."

"But how will I get through, then?"

"I will take you."

He looked at her, somewhat astonished, realizing that it was the natural thing to expect and wondering why he had not, therefore, expected it. "You?"

"Didn't you mean what you said back there when we made love? Don't you love me too? Don't you? Like you said?"

"Sure. Of course I do!" He grabbed her, pressed her close.

Kaliglia grunted.

"Then you would not leave me if you found the portal, you would either stay—which you have repeatedly sworn you will not do—or you would take me with you. If you work with me and swear to take me along, I will help you with my magics, help you to reach the throne room in the base of Castle Lelar—see, you would not even know which floor to look on—and I will get us through it. Shall we agree to that?"

"Well, it might be dangerous—"

"Is this a brushoff so soon?"

"No. I agree." He hugged her, bit at her neck, rubbed his beard over her face, smelling the warm femaleness of her, enjoying the yielding curves of her young body.

"Do they shave in your worldline?" she asked.

"Sometimes."

"I like you smooth. Smooth, long hair and smooth face."

"I promise."

"Now," she said, "we ought to go."

He grinned. They started to stand, jumped erect. A sound from something very large and very near came booming through the trees in a sing-songy warble based with a moan that sounded much like a huge bird . . .

Chapter Seven: LELAR'S DUNGEON

THE DUNGEON was a-dance with ghostly tongues of blue psionic light as part of Lelar's mind dealt with providing illumination. The bare earthen floor glowed dully with it as if it were burnished copper, the red dirt swirling without gleaming, bright without seeming bright. The walls, wet and moss-coated, gleamed brightly in spots, reflecting the glow. The one barred window set high in the wall behind the hag showed twinkling stars and a few dark forms of light clouds.

Against the far wall, the hag stood. Her hair fell to her waist, tangled into greasy knots, gray streaked with snow white, white like the center of the sun must be, white like the legends said the center of the Great Fire had been. She was dressed in leather and burlap, the traditional materials of hags, and her feet were crudely sandaled with leather straps and pads of leather for soles.

At the hag's feet lay the bodies of two blasted, charred manbats. They lay in a tangle of crisped wings and shriveled legs, their eyes either singed from their sockets or staring straight ahead at nothingness. They were the manbats that had helped to bring her here while Lelar rode control on her. They had not lived to walk away from her once he had lost his complete crush on her psionic abilities.

"Listen!" Lelar snarled across the bare earth at her.

"I refuse."

"I am winning," he said. He straightened his fur-edged greatcoat to show that he had energy for minor things aside from the contest of magics. "Look, I can even maintain the light and fight you

at the same time."

"The light . . . will . . . grow . . . dim . . . Lelar," she said. But her voice was lacking the booming, commanding tone that it had first contained when she had been brought into the spider-web threaded rooms, under the dark and dripping stone arches, Lelar holding a candle because he was reserving all of his power to completely clamp her magics down until she could be placed in the dungeon and, worked over. Yes, then it had been a strong and defiant voice. But now it was weak and contained a note of resignation that Lelar noted and appreciated.

"The light stays bright, and I press the attack!"

She screamed.

He stabbed again with his psionic knife.

She choked off this scream, still tough enough to deny him the pleasure of hearing it.

She struck back, catching him unaware and dropping him to his knees.

She allowed herself a hope of victory.

She twisted her spurred magic blade in his brain.

But the light did not dim.

He lunged back.

She screamed as he twisted the magic knife, spinning open her thoughts and peeling them like ripe fruit.

She passed out.

When she woke, there was still light.

She tried to strike him.

Her blade of mental force moved slowly.

Through syrup . . .

He shielded.

Her blow was deflected harmlessly.

She tried again.

Missed again.

He stabbed.

She screamed.

"You are mine," he said. "I have taken your powers and have tamed them from tigers into kittens. You will do my bidding from this time forth. And I warn you, you wicked old bitch, that refusal to do what I command will meet with the slowest and most horrible of deaths. I have keyed your powers. I have locked them away from me. You will never harm me. You have no arm with which to hit back."

She tried again.

He stabbed, stabbed, stabbed until she was babbling.

And still, still there was light . . .

Chapter Eight: THE THOBS

AGAIN THE AIR was rent with the eerie cry. It shifted up and down the musical scale, never producing music, a piercing ululation that chilled Jake through and through until he fancied he could hear his bones rattling at the joints, banging and clacking against one another within the meager and trembling sack of his skin. He forced his lips to suck in air to his aching lungs. He wet his lips with his almost dry tongue, squeezed it against the roof of his mouth to gain some saliva and tried again. He found, at last, his voice where it had hidden deep within his throat. "What the hell is that?"

Cheryn shook her head doubtfully. Black hair flew. But there was no need to answer his question, for the thing that was screaming showed itself just then.

It came around the edge of the woods, knocking over a small tree and crushing bushes and logs beneath it, rolling over

stones that lay in its pathway, never, ever going around anything. It came forward like a tank, like the greatly increased tread of a tank somehow enlarged and enlarged and enlarged—and given sentience. It was a great worm of sorts, easily a hundred feet in length, each glossy, yellow segment perhaps four or five feet across and bristled with various sizes and lengths of black and orange and yellow hairs. Its main segment towered fifty feet in the air as it moved in front of the grove, its anterior segments thrusting off the ground, another fifty feet of posterior kicking and writhing, propelling it toward them at a frightening speed. It was vaguely reminiscent of a centipede, the one insect that Jake, always and still, had irrationally feared in his own worldline, though its glossy segments were studded with the under-developed cilia instead of real legs, and though it could not truthfully be said it scitter-walked like a centipede but slithered, instead, like a blacksnake, head whipping high and proud.

Head . . . The oral segment itself was enough to give him nightmares for the rest of his life. The bulb of yellow flesh, devoid of hair and, therefore, naked in comparison to the cilia-marked other segments was capped by a sucking, oval mouth that drew upon the air like a vacuum cleaner. Two sensory swaths comparable to eyes and two others apparently for olfactory sensitivity, ringed that mouth with pulsating gray light filling them like dimmed light bulbs.

"Run!" Jake shouted. "We can't fight it!"

"Where?" she asked. She thought of lifting herself, but she could not lift him, except perhaps with a great wind. But she could never leave the dragon to its mercy,

and the dragon would need too large a wind, indeed.

"Back over the bridge," he answered.

They turned and stumbled toward the natural bridge that Jake and Kaligia had passed over not very long ago, Jake holding Cheryn with his arm, the giant reptile lumbering last, protecting their rear from the horror that moved after them.

But they had gone only half the distance to the gorge when there was a screeching and clittering ahead of them—and a second centipede-like monster pulled itself over the gorge wall onto the bridge, successfully blocking their departure. They stood for a moment, watching it in disbelief. Then they turned. The first beast was gaining on them, its mouth drawing in air with an audible, wet gurgling, blowing it out again through another hole in its fifth segment.

"They're thobs!" Cheryn said in sudden realization. Her tone was based on joy.

"What?" Jake pressed her close, his heart racing. His mind was filled with centipede scenes from his home worldline—finding them in the bathroom of their summer cottage and racing for someone to come and kill them . . . And now all those wriggling, hairy centipedes that he had killed were coming back, larger—much, much larger!—than life to revenge themselves . . .

"There must be a Talented nearby," she explained. "Perhaps there was one traveling with the manbats. These beasts are not real. They're THought OBJECTs. Thobs."

"Then we have nothing to fear?"

"Oh, yes we do!"

"But—"

"They could kill us as easily as if they

were real. They have a thought-coagulation substance, a cohesion of pseudo-matter, psionic force. But with our own thobs, we can fight back!"

The centipede slithered closer, its leathery segments shushing across the ground. The second lay just across the bridge, blocking their only pathway to safety.

Cheryn wrinkled her brow, concentrated.

She muttered the appropriate curses.

Sweat beaded her forehead.

The centipede came anyway.

But suddenly the earth between them and the beast was bristled with iron spikes as long as a man's arm and as thick. The points of the spikes gleamed blackly in the sun.

The centipede rolled onto them. It screamed a different sort of scream, then. Its unreal insides spilled across the ground, sticky yellow fluid like syrup. It stopped approaching, tried to turn and slither off the stakes. But it only gutted itself more completely. It toppled full length onto the spears, impaling itself two hundred times, and kicked out the last of its quasi-life.

"You got it!" Jake shouted, jubilant.

"Good," Kaliglia said, relieved.

But the centipede behind them leaped up, no longer indolent, and slithered across the bridge toward them.

They turned to it.

It reared, its mouth sucking.

Cheryn squinted.

It rushed them, ululating.

Suddenly, the earth itself reared up beneath the beast and sent it toppling backwards. The rocks and shale and dirt beneath it boiled and slashed it as efficiently as sharp knives. It reversed, tried to get away from the phenomena. Jake could see, through the illusion, that

the earth was not touched. This was only a thob too, this shower of cutting rocks, a mirage of nonetheless deadly force summoned to do battle with another and equally deadly mirage. At last, the thob reared, tumbled backward over the lip of the gorge, spouting fluid, and crashed to the bottom. A hail of earth and rocks, shale and boulders followed it, burying it.

When they turned, the body of the first centipede that had been impaled on the iron stakes was gone.

So were the stakes.

Then the sky dropped.

The other Talented had liked Cheryn's tricks with the rocks. He used it himself, making the sky to open over them and drop upon them a wide assortment of stones, stones large and stones small, boulders and pebbles.

Cheryn squinted again.

Immediately, fierce winds sprang up about them, though they did not ruffle Jake's shirt or Cheryn's robe.

The rocks caught in the air streams and hurtled away, falling with heavy thuds to both sides of the trio.

Jake cheered again.

Kaliglia rumbled.

"Look for a Talented hiding in the woods," Cheryn said between clenched teeth. We can't keep dodging his attacks all day. We have to know where he's at and thrust an offensive at him."

Jake knelt and scanned the woods.

Boom-boom-boom! the rocks fell about him, shaking the earth but never mangling the flesh they were summoned to mangle. As they fell, struck, and settled into stillness, they disappeared.

The enemy Talented needed his magics to manufacture more to drop on them.

A flash of orange . . .

A crescent of it . . .

A black robe . . .

"I see him!" Jake snapped.

Suddenly, the boulders ceased to fall. Instead, the ground had mouths.

Sharp-toothed mouths that opened everywhere on the dirt and began snapping at their heels, their toes.

Cheryn shouted in pain.

Her right foot was bloody.

Jake stomped at a mouth, felt teeth slide across his shin. He pulled it back. The mouth had taken his sandal.

Kaliglia rumbled, yelped.

Abruptly, they all had steel shoes, even the dragon.

The teeth broke off as the mouths continued snapping at them.

Then the mouths were gone.

"Where is he?" Cheryn asked, gasping.

"There. By that large boulder. Crouched beside it. There where the two pine trees—"

"I see him."

She squinted again.

Jake wished he could do something.

In an instant, the woods behind the enemy Talented were filled with licking red flames that swam through the trees, catching none of the branches but swarming toward the lone man crouched by the boulder where the two pine trees—

The Talented stood, knowing that he was known, no longer trying to conceal himself. The orange crescent of the House of Lelar rippled across the front of his costume, a challenge to Cheryn's courage. But an emblem did not faze her. The fires continued to burn through the trees, nearer and nearer to him.

He came out of the woods and stared across the field at her.

She waved.

He clenched his fists.

Jake thought he squinted.

Then grasses sprung up about them, grasses that grew white like albino

feather-creatures. But then the feathers grew wet and sleek like strings. And the strings writhed like worms.

Cheryn speeded up the advance of the flames.

The man continued walking toward them.

The white worms laced about their feet.

Jake jerked his leg to free it but could not move. The white worm-grass-feathers held him securely, crept up his legs, growing longer and longer, wrapping his ankles now.

The dragon was also victimized. It pulled its massive legs, trying to rid itself of what had at first seemed like a nuisance but now threatened to be a serious, death-filled plague. He couldn't move any more than Jake.

Cheryn was perspiring heavily now.

Her face was strained and weary.

She drew the flames closer. They danced a hundred feet into the air, madly crackling and hissing.

The man came on.

The white worm grasses had tangled about Jake's waist now, had snared his left arm and was wrapping it tight to his side. He choked off the screams that bubbled wildly in his throat and tried to concentrate on some line of action. The Talented was going to try to outlast them, to bind them here until he could come and finish them off without thobs, choke them with his bare hands—all but the dragon, of course. He held his right arm over his head so that he might have one hand, at least, to fight back with, one hand to punch and claw with.

The Talented came nearer.

Flames crackled.

The white worms slithered over his neck, his chest securely tied, laced about his upheld arm and drew it, inexorably, back to his side, lacing it where he could

not use it.

The enemy Talented was, perhaps, only fifty feet away.

He could feel the flames of the fake fire.

Cheryn's fire . . .

Now useless . . .

The worm grasses clamped shut his gaping mouth, sealed his lips with their sticky tendrils.

They began growing up his nose.

He tried to scream.

His mouth was sealed.

So this was how it was to end. The tendrils would grow up his nose, fill his sinus cavities, seek his brain, cracking bone with their pressure. They would grow through his skull, devour his gray matter and turn him into a babbling, senseless creature before he—mercifully—slipped into death . . .

The Talented was only twenty-five feet away.

The fire behind him died.

The ground beneath the man's feet developed mouths.

He created magic steel shoes.

Boulders fell on him.

He made a wind to toss them aside.

But then Cheryn threw the last and most dangerous ploy into action. Suddenly, directly beside the man, she created a centipede thob, towering above them, ready to strike all three of them and the dragon down. It was risking their own lives with their own thob, but it put the enemy's life on the line too.

He made spears on the earth.

But the centipede developed slimy metal skin that the spears could not penetrate.

The enemy Talented opened the sky, caused boulders to fall upon it, booming and cracking, smashing together as they fell.

But air holes opened on the metal

plates, some as big as silver dollars, others as small as pencil dots, released violent puffs of wind that blew the boulders away.

Cheryn made the metal-plated centipede start to fall on them . . .

The enemy held out. He saw her plan. But at the last minute, he dropped his magics and turned all of his formidable force on the thob centipede that was about to crush and devour them.

The white worm grasses disappeared.

The enemy blasted the centipede out of the sky, turned it into flickers of purple flame and clouds of green and yellow smoke.

And when he turned . . .

. . . Cheryn blasted him . . .

Flames enveloped his body

White . . .

White flames . . .

In seconds, his eyes were charred lumps of jelly in his sockets, and his lips had been seared from his teeth so that he grinned a skeletal grin and toppled forward onto the ground—quite obviously dead, killed by a thob, murdered by the unreal.

Cheryn turned to Jake.

Jake smiled, reached for her, proud of what she had done, happy that they had survived and that he could hold her again.

She took a step toward his arms and collapsed full length upon the ground, unconscious.

"It is foolishness," Cheryn said adamantly. She crossed her fine legs and leaned against the tree trunk, scowling.

"I won't turn back."

"That was an accidental encounter," she said, pressing the point. "What do you think it will be like when Lelar is waiting for us, when he sets his best

Talented after us, three and four at a time?"

"Think of that!" Kaliglia said, shaking his enormous head, clucking his tongue, shuffling his mammoth feet uneasily.

"Doesn't bother me."

"Nothing bothers you!" Cheryn snapped. "You're too dense."

Jake stood, brushed the dirt off his trousers. "If you two want to stay behind, that is okay. I had hoped— But, it's your choice."

"You can't succeed without my magics," Cheryn said smugly.

"I can try."

"You mean you would go on, pitting your bare hands and Kell's silly knife against thobs and manbats? You'd go on without me?"

"Sure would." He slung the depleted knapsack over his shoulders, jabbed the knife through a loop on his jeans, and took a few steps toward the forest.

"Wait," she said, thinking furiously.

He turned, stopped. "What is it?"

She thought of a new tack now, and she smiled sweetly, ready to put it into practice. "I thought you said you loved me."

"I do."

Kaliglia shuffled uncomfortably.

"Then you wouldn't walk off and leave me like this."

He smiled back, understanding her ploy. "It is not me who is leaving you. It's the other way around. I am going home, and you refuse to help me get there or to come along with me."

She felt anger, but she tried to control it. "And once we get to your home, your worldline, what would become of me? Once you are back there—"

"I'd marry you," he said.

She continued over him: "—with all those girls you once knew and once slept

with, what would happen—" She stopped, his words finally registering with her. "You'd what?"

"Marry you."

"But—"

"I was serious. Were you?"

She stood and stamped her feet as if she were beating out little fires that nibbled at her toes. "Oh! You're so goddamned sneaky!"

"Well!"

"I hate you."

"I guess—" he began.

"But I love you too."

She crossed the space between them. "Come on, let's hurry and make a little time before darkness. Someone might come looking for the manbats and that other Talented."

"Wait," Kaliglia snapped, shifting from his left foot to his right so that he wallowed like a great ship in high tide.

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"I—"

"You want out of our bargain. You want to go back to the Sorceress—"

"No, no!" the dragon protested, waddling up to them. "No, no, nothing at all like that."

"Well?" Cheryn asked impatiently.

"I want to come along."

"No one's stopping you," Jake said, turning to start again.

"You don't understand."

"Well explain, for crissakes! Don't hold us here until more manbats come looking for their buddies," Cheryn said.

"I want to go through the portal with you," Kaliglia blurted. "I want to go back to your worldline."

Jake dropped his mouth, almost needed his hands to push his lower jaw back into place. "Impossible!"

"No. Golgoth said the hole was wide enough to drive a dozen horses through.

I'm not as big as a dozen, by any means, perhaps only as large as seven or eight. I'll fit."

"But how could we ever get you in the castle?"

"You and Cheryn could go first. When you're inside and ready to make your escape through the wall, Cheryn could blast open the castle with her magics, make a pathway through for me."

"Too dangerous," Jake said. "We don't need a mount. Cheryn can make me fly like she can, and then we will make better time than if—"

"No," Cheryn said. "I cannot levitate and propel both of us and still be on guard against manbats and thobs. We need a mount." She locked her emerald eyes with Jake's blue eyes, and they seemed to communicate through the gaze alone.

"All right," Jake said at last. "We'll work something out. But why this sudden desire to plunge into the adventure with us?"

Kaliglia snorted. "It gets pretty boring around here. Awfully boring. I might be afraid, but at least something interesting will be going on for a change."

Chapter Nine: MISSION FOR LELAR

LELAR SAT on his carved onyx throne, fingering the heads of dragons that formed the ends of each of the arm rests. He was dressed in white from head to foot, a white slouch hat, a white cape, a white, ruffled shirt, white trousers, and white albino deerskin boots. Only the orange crescent of Lelar on his left shoulder broke the starkness of his

uniform. But despite his snowy appearance, his mood was black.

The doors to the throne room flew wide, banged against the stone walls, shuddered and were still. Four manbats shoved the hag through. She fell onto her knees, toppled onto her face. Her hands were bound behind her back by shimmering thob rope constructed from the fringe powers of Lelar's mind.

"It is thoughtful of you to lay prone before the king," Lelar said, smiling.

The manbats laughed and nodded at one another. One of them moved forward and kicked the hag in the side. The next instant, he was a burning lump, writhing on the floor, smoking.

"That was a bad move," Lelar said. He thrust his psionic blade into her skull and completely scrambled her brains.

She screamed.

He made her writhe.

He made her try to climb the walls.

He made her howl like a dog and gnaw at the floor as if it were a bone.

He made her vomit and made her consume her own mess as a cat might.

He made her beg.

And whimper.

And plead.

And at last he released her and left her slumped on the floor, a shivering, defeated mass of flesh and, mostly, bones, a Talented without a will, the tool of a greater magic. "If you ever," he said evenly but with malice afoot in each word, "destroy one of my men again, I will torture you for a thousand days and nights before killing you. If you ever attempt to escape, you will be bound by my will into the stone of these walls with only your head thrust out, and you will be the brunt of every foul and degrading amusement I can discover for as long as I shall live—which shall be at least another

six hundred years. You are mine. Get used to the idea, you stupid bitch. Get used to it. Live with it. You have no choice."

She wanted to spit, but she dared not. She was getting used to it. She had no choice. She knew it.

"Now listen," Lelar said, standing and pacing about the great throne room, standing at last before the hole in the left wall and watching the play of dark colors from the mysterious world beyond. "An expeditionary force of manbats, complete with its Talented supervisor, has disappeared. They should have been back this evening, but they have not arrived, and I cannot find the 'mind' of the Talented no matter how hard I search with my own magics. I must assume they have been murdered—or at least that the Talented has and does not, therefore, register with me. I want you to take a squad of manbats in search of the first squad, of any traces whatsoever giving clue to their disappearance. If you see anyone mysterious on the roads, anyone aside from Commoners, anyone who looks capable of such destruction, I want you to bring them to me. Only another Talented could have destroyed my man. But all Talented in Lelar—with your taming—are under my control. Someone new must have arrived. I want he or she or them found. Do you understand?"

She lay still, gasping for breath that was only now beginning to return to her tortured lungs.

"Do you understand?" he repeated, his voice climbing higher, growing tighter.

"Yes," she wheezed.

He booted her in the side as she started to get up, knocked her flat again. "Louder."

"Yes."

"Louder!"

"Yes!" She screamed, cursing him silently.

He turned and walked back to his throne, purposely baring his back to her as a taunt that he knew she would not take up, would not dare to take up. He turned again and sat in a swirl of white. "Then get on with it," he snapped, dismissing her.

Chapter Ten: A DREAM OF KINGS

THEY STOPPED for the evening, and Jake went hunting pheasants with a thob bow and arrow. He had asked Cheryn to make, instead, a gun and bullets, but she could not, for she had never seen one of these things. She asked him to explain how it worked in hope that she could create one from the description. Jake found, however, that though he could explain what a gun did and—generally speaking—how it did it, he could not give her a diagram of the workings of the device. Such was the mind of a Twentieth Century man, familiar with the surface of the things that sustained him but unable to work with those things on any practical level. The world of Jake's probability had become too specialized so that one man knew only one part and could not command the general picture with what skills and knowledge he held.

Anyway, he brought back two pheasants.

Kaliglia was content with devouring half the undergrowth in the immediate forest, snuffing and sniffing to determine what was good and what was tasteless, what was healthful and what

was poisonous. He studiously avoided the basketball mushrooms that popped round heads up here and there and concentrated on berry bushes and rhubarb which he ate by the bale.

Cheryn and Jake salvaged some of the berries before Kaliglia could mangle them or eat them himself. Cheryn roasted the fowls with her magics, causing a false fire of orange and magenta to spring up under the spit Jake had fashioned from sharpened sticks. The flames roasted the meat but did not char the wood. Soon, the aroma of cooking pheasant threaded the air and had their mouths watering. They took a bird each and used cutting utensils Cheryn created with her Talent, knives and forks of humming mind-patterns. Jake ate all parts of his bird, but Cheryn daintily concentrated on the white breast meat, leaving the legs and wings behind.

When they were finished and the dragon had come back to curl behind them as a wall against the wind, Jake said, "What is this Lelar like? I can hardly imagine him as evil as he seems to be."

"I've only seen him once," Cheryn said, "Once he thought to federate all Talented on both sides of the gorge, and he threw a gala ball for everyone he hoped to sway to his way of thinking. He saw the Commoners as victims to be plucked, and he wanted aid from his fellow Talented to do just that. He had conquered the land to the sea, and wanted to avoid a physical clash with the lands beyond the gorge (since his manbat army was greatly depleted and the number of Talented beyond the gorge was great). So the Grande Ball. I could recall it for you, implant the visions that I remember in your mind."

"I'd see Lelar?"



"Oh, yes. Just as I saw him. I was eleven then."

"What do I do?"

"Nothing. Just relax, close your eyes, and try to free your mind from as much concentration as you can."

"Can do."

Kaliglia shifted, and the ground roared.

"Me too," he said plaintively.

"Okay," Cheryn said. "You too."

She began spinning her magics, calling up the old memories, giving them flesh and making them dance on the underside of her companion's eyelids . . .

The great ceiling of the Grande Ballroom of the Castle Lelar had been finished at the cost of millions to the treasury of the monarch, and—it was rumored throughout the city of Lelar among shopkeepers and laborers, drinking men and sober—had cost hundreds of lives. The room was nearly two hundred feet long and three hundred wide, and the ceiling that roofed it was on four great arches running the width, arches made of rough-hewn wooden beams bolted together with sturdy wooden bolts that studded the length of the rafters like black jewels, one every inch around the joints so that where the beams met it seemed as if a cluster of hard-shelled beetles nested, buzzing. At the peak of each of the arches was a circular window looking upon the heavens so that the teardrop moon shone yellowly down upon the stone floor.

Cheryn stood in a darkened corner, watching the dancers.

They bobbed by her, their fantastic costumes glittering, sparkling, rustling and clattering. Here a costumed knight danced with a lady dressed as a sleek cat, black fur catching hints of the moonlight and shining with an almost

phosphorescent magnificence. There, to her right, a man horned and cloven as a satyr danced with a wood nymph whose bare breasts wiggled with each beat of the throbbing music. The two-man Talented Orchestra provided the accompaniment of a forty piece orchestra. There were many violins, now and then a guitar, sometimes a harp. There were trumpets and oboes and bassoons and pipes of various kinds. A tuba oom-pahed now and again, and the drums filled in with a steady beating as of rain upon the glass-paneled ceiling.

Cheryn worked her way among the crowd standing and laughing, drinks in her hands, around the periphery of the floor, to the punchbowl. She ladled out a

"Bad proposition?" Lelar said, swallowing what was left of his whiskey. "You speak like a fool, Krater. Don't you realize that Benevolency is out? We have checked our magics for too long. We were meant to rule over the Commoners. We are divinely chosen!"

"A fine one to speak of divine choice," Krater said, turning his eyes from the dancers.

The wolf sneered. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"We've heard of the atrocities committed by your manbats in capturing the lands to the ocean."

"Do they frighten you?"

It was the vampire's turn to sneer. "You will not cross the gorge, Lelar. Don't threaten. There are too many Talented there. You would be repelled. Why, the Talented of your own kingdom are not entirely with you."

"Some day—" Lelar began.

"That day is a long way off, Lelar."

The wolf was silent a moment. "It need never come. If we could federate to mutual benefit—"

"I said no."

"The atrocities that so concern you, Krater, were done without my knowledge. After all, the manbats are but highly developed animals—or highly de-volved humans. They are vicious by nature. One could not expect that I would—"

"Your own torture rooms are witness to your personal sadism, Lelar."

"You speak nonsense."

"I speak truth. We know of the torture rooms below this castle. We have our informants too, Lelar. We know of the things you do, the unspeakable things. We know of the harem you have had—and what happens to those you grow tired of, whose bodies are no longer varied enough to please you."

The wolf snorted, tried to drink, found his glass empty. "Then what did you and your Talenteds come for?"

"For the pleasure of saying no," Krater snapped.

Lelar, furious, threw a magic fist into Krater's stomach, doubling the tall man over. He brought a magic fist down on the back of the vampire's neck and crumpled him to the floor.

Krater shielded himself from magic, struggled to his feet.

Lelar swung the glass.

Krater had not shielded against normal matter.

The glass caught his cheek, broke, twisted into his flesh.

Blood gurgled out of his torn face and down the wolf's hand.

Krater disintegrated the glass.

Lelar struck out with another magic fist.

It bounced off the shield with a great display of blue sparks.

Krater struck out with his own magics and knocked Lelar to his knees.

Lelar threw on a shield.

cupful of the brew and continued around the floor, secreting herself in another corner, eyes wide and watchful of the glory of the Grande Ball. She sipped the punch . . .

The bare-breasted wood nymph spun by, light on her toes, her satyr with his hands upon her bare waist, inching them up . . .

Everyone was laughing, and the air was heavy with breath and liquor, smoke and perspiration.

Now a flute . . .

Moonlight and flutes . . .

She had been watching for some time. The dancers changed and the tempo of the music changed, but the wonder remained as new costumes replaced the old. All of the fanciful suits were magics, called up to cover the nakedness of their owners, magics that found their basics in pictures and descriptions from the Old Books that dated before the Great Fire. Whenever one of the Talenteds grew tired of his or her costume, he simply altered it on the spot, momentarily naked, then clothed again in brilliance that transcended his previous disguise. The wood nymph had forsaken her leafed garment for a G-string and stood nearly naked with her partner, who was now dressed in a striped coat and wide-legged pants like a stage comedian. When the music began again, they turned to dancing once more, calling upon their magics for the energy necessary to keep them going and going and going . . . Slowly, she became aware the two men in front of her were arguing. She slunk further into the dark corner and tried to concentrate on the dancers.

Moonlight .

Tambourines . . .

One of the men cursed the other vehemently. Finally, she turned her

attention to them. One was a tall, needle-thin man dressed in a black cape and tuxedo, his hands adorned with fake claws, his mouth split with false fangs. He was holding a drink, turning the glass round and round in his bony hands, looking down at the shorter, more muscular man who was dressed as a wolf, his long tail curled around his right foot, his own false fangs yellowed and foam-flecked.

"You won't even listen!" the wolf said, snarling and baring his fangs so that it appeared he would sink them into the vampire's throat.

"Because it is a bad proposition, Lelar," the vampire said, fiddling with his glass, trying to keep his eyes on the dancers, but constantly letting them stray back to the shorter man before him.

Cheryn forgot the dancers completely as she remembered the descriptions of the king and tried to match them with what she could see through the wolf costume. Yes, it was King Lelar. She felt a chill go through her. She had heard all the stories too . . .

By now, the crowd had realized what was in progress, and the dancing had stopped. For a few moments, the tooting and twanging of the orchestra continued. Then, as the Talented musicians saw what was happening, the music too ceased, and the huge hall grew silent but for the whirring of the shields the two combatants had called into being.

Lelar and Krater threw bolts of hissing energy at one another, but the shields deflected them every time, dispersed them upwards in showers of blue and white sparks that flung dangerously close to the wooden beams.

A squad of manbats entered the room, spears at ready, and backed Lelar, now and then jabbing senselessly at Krater

with their weaponry.

Some of the watching Talented that had come from beyond the gorge now opened up with their powers to break down Lelar's shield.

It flickered.

The faint aurora disappeared.

Krater leapt.

He twisted a spear from the nearest manbat, turned and drove the point into Lelar's chest.

But as Krater had healed his glass-slashed face, so Lelar healed his wound and dissolved the spear.

Lelar's Talented came quickly to his rescue, breaking down Krater's shield so that both men were unguarded.

Krater's people drew their power away from Lelar and helped their leader form a new shield. But when this was done, it was obvious that Lelar and his Talented had done the same.

Both men stood shielded, facing each other.

The moon shone above.

"Get out!" Lelar roared. "The pack of you get—"

Suddenly the dream was gone.

But something remained.

Jake shook his head, trying to think what.

It was the manbats. They had been in the dream, and now they were here in reality!

Cheryn screamed.

There was a flutter of wings.

Jake rose, his stomach suddenly oily and queasy. He was shaking all over, and a cold sweat had broken out down his back and across his forehead. There were three manbats—all with the legbands of Lelar—already on the ground, and an unknown number flapped noisily overhead in the darkness. He scrambled

about, found his knapsack, and withdrew the knife that Kell had given him, the knife that had served him so well in his first meeting with the leathery killers. But before he could act on a single one of them, Cheryn had burned them in balls of spitting green flame tongued through with orange. The manbats were gone. More were coming.

Six others came out of the night sky, and drifting among them was a withered old woman in black leather and burlap drapings, the orange crest of Lelar across her robe.

"A hag!" Cheryn shouted. "An experienced witch!"

"Burn them!" he called to her.

"I can't!" she shouted. "She is draining my powers . . . draining . . . them . . . until . . ."

He crossed the distance between him and the Crimson Witch, brought his knife around on the neck of the first manbat that had just reached the girl. Blood fountained, and the beast went down kicking, snarling, its yellow fangs dripping saliva. "What is she doing?" he asked.

"She knows more than . . . I . . . know. Her power . . . is greater."

"What can I—"

"She means to capture me."

"I won't let her."

"You . . . cannot . . . stop her. Here . . . take this . . . to use . . . on . . . thobs . . . You . . ."

"What will she do with you?"

"Take me . . . to Lelar."

"The Castle?"

"Yes."

Another bat swooped in on him by surprise, raked claws up his back.

It erupted in flames and was gone.

"I thought—" he began.

"I didn't," Cheryn assured him. "The hag . . . did."

"But why?"

"Here!" Cheryn insisted.

A sword had appeared before him, a thob sword, long and pointed. "You need not slash much . . . with . . . it," Cheryn cautioned him. "The . . . magic . . . in it . . . will kill your enemy . . . upon touching his blood . . ."

He grasped the sword.

Another manbat swooped in.

He stabbed it with an overhand thrust, caught it lightly along its ribs. The blow should not have been fatal, but the beast puffed into ashes and was gone.

"The hag," he said, waving the sword. "I can kill her with this!"

"No. She is . . . too strong."

Cheryn suddenly lifted from the ground and was drifting up into the darkness. Jakě jumped, tried to grab her slim ankles but could not. Then, as he watched her go, the voice of the hag, withered and beaten, slithered in his mind, shaped in his brain without sound: *Go to see Mordoth. He hates Lelar as do I.*

"What is this?" he shouted to the witch.

Mordoth. In the Great Tree.

"Wait!"

But they were gone, the manbats, the hag, Cheryn. Only darkness waited overhead. He was alone with the dragon and the night . . .

Chapter Eleven: THE GREAT TREE

THEY SET OFF that night, searching in the forest for the road that Cheryn had

mentioned earlier. Jake's thoughts were on the girl, recalling the form of her body and the shape of her mind. Both were delightful. He was very much concerned for her. Had she not mentioned, in recalling her meeting with Lelar, that the king had torture chambers below his castle? Would he use them now as he had used them those years before? Would he use them on a Talented? And how could he make a Talented hurt?

Then he thought of the hag that had come with the manbats, the hag that had sealed off Cheryn's powers and had captured her. Apparently Lelar was a great enough sorcerer that he could cause pain in other Talented; for how else could he have gained the services of the hag who had bluntly stated she hated the king? Or was that a ruse too? Were they sending him to Mordoth so that Mordoth could work some other evil on behalf of Lelar? No. No, had they wanted to bring him to bad times, the hag and the manbats could have seen to it easily enough. The hag, in fact, had killed the manbat that had attacked him. Perhaps the old witch was sincere, was working for Lelar against her will, was giving Jake a good clue by telling him to look for Mordoth in the Great Tree.

And that was something else that bothered him. What did she mean by "Great Tree"? These people sometimes spoke in euphemisms (calling the nuclear war the Great Fire), so perhaps her words could not be taken literally. Was it really a tree or something else, something simpler—or more complex? There was only one way to find out: find Mordoth. They searched for the road, found it, followed it into Lelar in hopes of discovering a town where they might ask directions.

They marched a forced march until

sleep was a thing they could no longer deny. If they wished to be in top form when they met Mordoth—which they certainly did—they would have to sleep. Jake found a place off the main road where the trees and vines conspired to conceal an easy access to a clearing. When the dragon had entered after him, the open space was filled to capacity. But despite the lack of elbow room, there was warm grass and soft earth, and they fell asleep almost immediately.

They slept through the rising of the sun and the first early call of the birds of the forest. When they woke, the sun was approaching its zenith, perhaps only an hour from overhead. With Kaliglia's aid, Jake foraged the bushes and weeds for berries and nuts. He found an apple tree and discovered the fruit was much the same in this worldline as it had been in his own. He ate his fill of tangy cherries and apples, packing half a dozen apples in his knapsack.

"Which way?" Kaliglia asked as they returned to the hard-packed earthen roadway.

"Deeper into Lelar," Jake said. "Very likely, there will be no towns between us and the gorge, so we can only advance."

They set off down the tree-hung road, Jake walking to limber his sleep-stiffened legs. Later, he rode the dragon until they reached a hamlet of perhaps five hundred people. There were approximately two hundred buildings, all stretched along the length of the highway. There were no secondary streets. The road, however, had been made for horses, not dragons, and Kaliglia nearly filled it to overflowing.

Jake dismounted before the local pub, a two-story stone building with six shuttered windows facing the street like cataracted eyes. The doorway was unblocked, peering in on a dim interior.

Flies buzzed about the entrance. Above the door was a sign that said THE GOLDEN CUP in hand-painted letters. Dust coated it thickly, blotting out the H in THE and the LDE in GOLDEN. There were several worn pathways to the door, and he fell into one of them, entering the pub.

The main room was octagon-shaped, though the exterior of the place would have concealed this fact. In those places where space seemed to be wasted by not having interior conform to exterior, there would be private rooms where gambling and sexual tete-a-tetes could be held in discretion. The main room was filled with randomly scattered tables, most empty at this early hour. Against the back wall was the bar, and behind that were kegs and barrels, bottles and crocks on a shelf that ran the entire length of the establishment, save for three feet at the left end where a window looked out onto another forest beyond town.

Only two patrons stood along the bar. The bartender, behind, was a burly man in rolled shirtsleeves and a colorful yellow and orange gypsy headband. He was washing out a row of mugs and drying them, setting the cleaned pieces on the shelf with the kegs and bottles. All three men turned to stare at Jake as he crossed the room, the thob sword banging against his thigh.

"What can I do for you?" the bartender asked, stopping his dishwashing.

"I'm in need of a little information."

One of the two patrons raised his eyebrows knowingly, as if all who asked for information of a pub keeper were either miserably poor or up to no good whatsoever.

"What's that?" the burly pubman asked.

"I'm looking for the Great Tree."

"And Mordoth?" the bartender asked.

"Yes."

The three men turned to stare openly at him.

"What do you want with him?" one of the patrons asked, a skinny man with a bushy yellow moustache.

"I believe that's my business," Jake said.

The moustached man stood and took a step toward him, the second patron standing behind. Jake touched his hand to the hilt of the thob sword, and both men froze.

"Calm down now," the bartender said, picking up a glass and polishing it in an attempt to look nonchalant.

"I am calm," Jake said. "It's these two that want trouble."

"Luke, Fed, sit down," the bartender said.

The two men hesitated but finally sat. They looked ready to pounce.

"Now what did I say wrong?" Jake asked, still letting his hand play over the sword hilt.

"Look," the bartender said, leaning over the counter, resting elbows and thick arms on the polished wood surface, "Mordoth is important to us. You understand. He heals the sick people in town. We haven't had a death from sickness since he's been here. It's old age and accidents that claim us now. For the farmers out on the edge of town, he makes the crops grow. We'd be very upset if anything happened to Mordoth. And now you come in with a sword—a thob sword yet—swinging at your side, asking questions. Maybe if you explained yourself—"

"I—I need help to retrieve a prisoner."

"What?"

"King Lelar has taken a young witch prisoner, and I mean to take her back. I

was told Mordoth would help me."

"You were told?" the bartender said.

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Yeah," the man with the yellow moustache snapped. "By whom?"

"I don't see where that is any of your business. I mean Mordoth no harm, and I—"

Thunk! A dagger sunk into the table next to which Jake was standing, quivered in the wood and hummed like a tuning fork. He looked up, his stomach suddenly flopping over and over like a fish out of water. The bartender had put down his rags and had withdrawn a set of knives from under the counter. He held another dagger in his hand, weighted in his palm and ready to throw. "I can get you," he said matter-of-factly, "before you have that sword drawn."

He took his hand away from his hilt and held both arms out to his side to show that he did not intend to argue. He was perspiring, and it wasn't particularly that hot. "What do you want?"

"Just to know who told you to come to Mordoth," the moustached man said.

He hesitated. If they knew that a Talented in the employ of King Lelar had sent him, what would be their reaction? They were trying to protect Mordoth, after all. Wouldn't that other dagger come lightning quick across the counter and bury itself up to the hilt in his chest?

"Who?" the bartender demanded, swinging his hand as if ready to toss the glittering knife.

Truth, he decided quickly, was the best path. "A witch, my wife," one small untruth, "was kidnapped by an old hag and a squad of manbats. But before the hag left with her, she told me that she hated King Lelar and that she was serving him because he would kill her if

she did not. She told me that Mordoth could help me to get my woman back. That is all I know."

The three men exchanged glances. The bartender nodded and put the dagger down.

Jake sighed and collapsed into a chair.

"We know the hag," the bartender said. "Sad story. She was such an independent old bitch until Lelar got to working on her with his evil magics. But that's the story with all the Talented in this kingdom. Subservient to the last."

"But Mordoth—" Jake began.

"Mordoth too." The moustached man shook his head sadly, picked up his mug and downed a huge swallow of brew.

"Then how can he help me?" Jake asked, suddenly exasperated.

"He can't storm the walls of Castle Lelar for you," the bartender said. "But maybe there is some little thing he can do, something relatively inconspicuous, something Lelar would not notice. The hag must have had something in mind."

"You'll help me find him."

"Here," the bartender said, indicating the gate in the bar. "Come back here."

He stood and crossed to the gate. The bartender swung it inward for him, and he went behind the long bar. The bartender walked to the end where the window broke the wall. "Look here." He thrust a finger at the glass.

Jake came to the window and looked out. Beyond, a forest sprawled over the land, green and thick with gnarled trees that were hung with ropey yellow vines. "The Great Tree is in there?"

The bartender laughed. So did the other two. "That is the Great Tree," the moustached one said.

"The whole forest?"

"You got it."

"All those trunks are just branches of

the main tree whose trunk is roughly in the middle of all that. The branches dip into the ground and become roots for a while, then jump back out as big and healthy as when they went in. You ought to see it in winter when the leaves are gone. Sure is a scary, eerie sight."

"How do I find Mordoth in all that?" Jake asked.

"Mordoth will find you. Just ride into the forest, ride into the tree and he will come to you."

"Then I'd best be going. There isn't any time to waste."

"Not if Lelar has your witch already," the bartender said. He escorted Jake back through the gate and to the door of the bar. "We've decided to trust you, stranger," he said menacingly. "But if anything should happen to Mordoth, if you should be sent by some Power to do him harm, then your life will be worthless in these parts. We would find and kill you."

"Don't worry," Jake said. "I need Mordoth as much as you do. I will leave him as well as I found him. That I guarantee."

He mounted Kaliglia and rode him out of town toward the tangle of branches and leaves that was the Great Tree. As they went, he told Kaliglia what had transpired in the bar, explained the Great Tree when the dragon showed suspicion that they were being hoodwinked.

They crossed the grassy plain surrounding the tree and found themselves at the huge growth's perimeter without a pathway large enough for the dragon. They scouted the edge for a time, then stopped, tired of looking and pessimistic about finding a way even if they continued the search.

"So I get left behind again, huh?" the dragon grumbled.

"Looks that way." Jake slid off the giant back and bounced on his heels on the earth. He checked the thob sword, for he kept expecting it to vanish, but it was intact. "I'll be back when I have enlisted Mordoth's aid. That should be before dark."

"I'll eat," Kaliglia said, chomping off a cluster of leaves from the Great Tree and munching on them. "Nothing much else to do."

Jake stepped into the comparative darkness under the trees, waved a quick goodbye, and slipped along the mammoth branches, pushing his way through denser configurations of leaves and vines, his hand near the hilt of his sword, his eyes open for the appearance of Mordoth which the bartender had very nearly guaranteed.

Chapter Twelve: CONFRONTATION

THEY BROUGHT the witch before him and bound her to the stake in the center of the throne room. He got out of his ornate throne, his white robes in a swirl, the orange crescent rippling across his breast, and approached her, smiling. "Ah, the Witch of Eye Mountain," he said, rubbing his thin hands together, clicking his dirty nails like a lizard might click its claws. "I knew your mother quite well in the old days."

Cheryn spat on the floor at the old man's feet.

He laughed. "You are a prideful one, aren't you."

She spat again.

He laughed louder than before and rubbed his hands together energetically.

"Yes, I remember now. Your mother was the same way. Ah, I wonder if I could ever have tamed her? She was such a witch!"

"What do you want of me?" Cheryn hissed, wasting no time on pleasantries.

"And so pretty," Lelar said, ignoring her question. He cupped her head in his hand and lifted her face to his. She tried to jerk free, but he held her tightly. "More beautiful than your mother, even."

"What do you want?" Each word was hard and brittle enough to crack.

"I wonder if the rest of you—" He waved a hand, and her clothes were gone.

She screamed.

"Magnificent!" he said.

The two manbats standing guard by the gold-leaved door snickered and nudged each other knowingly.

Suddenly, the king was also naked. One moment he was dressed in the richest finery one might imagine, the next his skinny legs and swollen belly were there to be viewed.

"You're a mess yourself," Cheryn said and laughed.

He yelped and quickly attired himself again, using his own magics to create golden robes trimmed in black velvet and studded about the collar with semi-precious green and amber stones. Then he turned on her and frowned. "I should have put a hand over your magics earlier. I was careless."

"You were funny," she said. "But if you've had your thrill, would you mind clothing me again? I'm cold, and since you've clamped my Talent, I can't manage to stir up something myself."

He frowned, regained his good humor. One moment she was beautifully naked, the next she was clothed in beggar's rags. "That suits," Lelar said, laughing once again.

"Well, it keeps off the draft," Cheryn

agreed. "Now, what the hell do you want?"

"What do I want?"

"That was the question. And I certainly didn't address those two barbarians you have guarding the door."

"But, my dear," he said gently, sarcastically, "was it not you who invaded my kingdom? Was it not you who killed a detail of my manbats? Was it not, indeed, you who destroyed one of my best Talented with your magics?"

"And what were your lousy manbats doing that close to the gorge?"

He smiled. "I don't have to answer that. It is I who am asking the questions here. But because I want to see your reaction, I'll tell you what they were doing that near the gorge." He smiled again, licked his lips and paced off toward the throne. He whirled and faced her again. "Scouting!"

"What for?"

"For places to fortify. You see, I plan to take the land beyond the gorge. Then my kingdom will stretch from sea to sea."

"You'll be defeated!"

"No. Once I would have been, yes. Once, the superior forces of the Talented on your shore would have overwhelmed me. But not so any longer. I have commanded all the Talented on this side to obey me, and they do so out of great fear. They know what would happen to them if they disagreed or refused to obey. With them at my back and with my vast squads of manbats ready to die for me, I have the power to take both sides of the gorge. And I will. Very shortly."

"I'll warn them!"

He laughed. "You must get away first. And that you will not do."

"We'll see."

"Yes, your mother's spirit. But it will do you no good here. Now, suppose you

answer my question. What are you doing here."

She remained silent.

"What!"

"I won't say."

He circled her, came back to her face. "If you are expecting your friend and his beast to come to your rescue, forget it my dear. The hag should have killed them. I have punished her for the oversight. And tonight another squad of manbats *will* kill them. They will not have your magics to save them this time, nor will they have the intervention of the hag. Now, please tell me what you are doing here and tell me quickly, lest I get angry. You have not seen me angry."

She spat again.

He squinted, brought his Talent to bear on her.

She screamed and collapsed to the floor, her arms still bound to the stake.

He released her mind. "What are you doing in Lelar?"

"I can't tell you," she hissed, thinking of the new world beyond the portal in the wall that even now shimmered opaquely next to her, thinking of the virgin territory where Lelar would advance once he had conquered both sides of the gorge. He must be denied that new land!

He brought his powers to bear again.

She passed out.

When she came to again moments later, prodded to consciousness by Lelar's Talents, he bent over her and patted her shoulder. "Now, this is not what we want, is it. I don't want to bleed that magnificent spirit. I have use for it. You will make an excellent lover."

"No," she moaned, twisting at the stake.

Lelar cackled. The manbats cackled too. "Oh, but you will. And I can make you. So, you see, I don't want to drain you, to wrinkle you and make you old. I

want you as perfect as you are now. But I will still know what it is that brought you here. And I know how to make you tell."

"I won't!"

"We'll see. I'll ask you again tonight—after you have spent an hour or so in my private chambers."

"I—"

"Take her away to the castle matron," Lelar ordered the two manbats. "I'll send orders later what is to be done with her."

The manbats advanced, grinning . . .

Chapter Thirteen: MORDOTH

HE HAD BEEN walking some time when he came to the portal in the tree. It opened directly before him, and in the gloom he had momentarily mistaken it for the hungry mouth of some slothful, mammoth predator who expected him to walk right between its teeth. But a closer inspection had revealed a doorway into the branch. He poked his head through and saw a dimly lighted hallway stretching to his left and winding out of sight. He stepped through, and the portal slid shut behind him. Mordoth had found him, just as the men in the tavern had predicted.

Was that good or bad?

Again he was plagued with doubts. Who knew in what manner the mind of a madman like Lelar worked. Perhaps he *had* been meant to come to Mordoth to meet with his end. No. He shook his head as if that would send the doubt away. It did, a little. He decided that physical exertion would get him thinking healthy thoughts again, and he set off down the corridor. Mordoth was his friend. He needed Mordoth. Mordoth was a good

Talented, though he might be commanded by Lelar. Hadn't he seen proof that the Talented was helpful to Commoners in a time when Talented thought next to nothing of Commoners? Well, then he would have to trust that hag and go on. There was Cheryn to think of. He would put his fate in Mordoth's hands. Nevertheless, he kept his right hand on the sword, ready to draw it and fight if forced to it.

The corridor wound down for a time until he was certain that the branch had gone underground and had become a yards-thick root. The walls were dewy, which supported his assumption, and here and there various small worm-like organisms clustered on the walls. After some minutes, the walls became dry as the path slanted up. Ahead, he could see light where the corridor came into a room of some sort. He stepped up his pace and came to the end of the tunnel. The room he had seen lay ahead. Checking his sword one last time, he walked forward into the light.

It was fascinating. The room stretched across for a hundred feet, the walls all polished wood, the ceiling and floor joined together by great polished wooden stalagmites and stalactites. The light was magicked light, for there was no evident source. It seemed to issue from the wood itself, though a concentrated gaze on any one spot showed only dark, highly polished wood. But as impressive as the chamber was, it did not hold the object of his search. Mordoth was nowhere in sight.

He crossed the shiny floor to a flight of steps carved in the opposite wall, mounted them. Along the entire length of the staircase, the wall was carved with scenes of paradise and hell. There were naked maidens engaged in love with virile, muscular, handsome young men,

all postures and all acts included. But spaced between these were scenes of devils torturing equally beautiful people, devils with hunched backs and gnarled, angry faces. The work was intricate and flawless. At the top of the staircase, he moved through a vertical passageway with rungs carved from the walls and came out of a manhole into another room, much smaller than the grand chamber below, but also more intimate and somehow more beautiful. The ceiling sloped in all directions, blending in with the walls and floors so that the distinctions of partitions seemed to vanish, and Jake felt almost as if he were within a ball that had been hollowed into living quarters. The walls here were carved too, but in wild, freeform lines and patterns that told the eye nothing, that performed no artistic function for the viewer outside of the fact that it relaxed his eye and helped him become accustomed to the dim lighting.

"Sit down," a voice said out of the gloom. "Make yourself comfortable."

He jumped, turned, hunting the voice. He found the source. A dwarf sat in one corner of the room amidst a scattering of lush pillows. There was a bottle of wine before him and two glasses. "Who—" Jake began.

"Mordoth," the dwarf said. "When someone enters the tangles of the Great Tree, I imagine they come looking for me. You were, were you not?"

"Yes."

"Then come and sit and have some wine while we talk."

He crossed the room. Twice he had to hunch over to get past the sloped roof that would accommodate the dwarf but would not pass him. He thought, as he hunched, what the grand chamber below must be like to this little man. If it seemed a

hundred feet across to Jake, it would seem two hundred to Mordoth. He reached the pillows and sat across from the dwarf, accepted a glass of the darkly gleaming liquid and sipped it. It was quite pleasant, sweet and tangy at once. It gave off fumes that tickled his nose and made his mouth water.

"This is some place," Jake said, feeling a necessity for polite chatter before getting down to requests.

"I hollowed out the passages and the room with my magics. I always think a man's house should be as grand as he can manage. This is the best I have been able to accomplish to date, though I plan a lot more work on it."

Jake sipped more of the wine.

"You want something of me?" Mordoth asked, breaking the ice.

"Yes."

"If it is within my powers, I'll grant it."

"My wife has been kidnapped. I want her back."

"Who was your wife?"

"Cheryn, the Witch of Eye Mountain."

"The Crimson Witch!" Mordoth said, surprised.

"That's her."

"I can hardly believe—"

"It is true."

"Married, you say."

"We were going to be."

"And you are not a Talented!"

"Does that make me naturally inferior as an individual?" Jake snapped, suddenly bristling. Maybe it had been a mistake to come here. Maybe he should have tried it on his own.

"No, no," Mordoth said. "Excuse me if I sound racist. I was just surprised. I knew of no Talented that could tame her. I am surprised you could, my boy. Why, it's a wonder she didn't ask you when you made your first advance."

"She couldn't."

"Eh?"

"Talented's cannot affect me negatively. They can only do good for me. The Sorceress Kell gave me that protection."

"I see. And congratulations for winning such a fair woman!"

"But she's been kidnapped, you see. If I don't recover her, she won't ever marry me."

"But who could have kidnapped Cheryn? Her own magics are powerful enough to protect her. Surely—"

"It was King Lelar. More exactly, it was a hag he sent to do his dirty work."

Mordoth nodded wisely. "I know the hag."

"It was the hag that told me to come to you."

"Yes. Yes, of course. She works for Lelar but grudgingly. I knew he would get her, yet I knew he would never fully tame her."

Jake fidgeted on the pillows and finished his wine, not wanting to interrupt Mordoth as the dwarf sat cross-legged, his eyes closed and his brow knitted as if he were thinking. He poured himself another glass of wine without asking and sipped at it. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. "Will you help me?"

"I—"

"I know you work for Lelar too. I had hoped you were somewhat independent like the hag."

Mordoth laughed, but it was not an entirely happy laugh. "I am. And I will try to help you. I cannot lead you to the castle and assure you victory, for Lelar has too great a hold on me for that. But I might be able to . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Yes?"

"To tell you what the future holds for you."

"But how will that help if the future holds death and heartache?"

"Well," Mordoth said, grinning and drinking a glassful of wine in one gulp, "I just looked ahead a moment ago, and I saw something that might be of great help to you."

"What's that?"

"Tonight, after you have camped, a squad of manbats will come to kill you and your dragon friend."

Jake almost jumped up, thought of the low ceiling and restrained himself. "But what good does that do me? If they are successful, it hardly matters whether I know it or not. Are they successful?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

Mordoth poured himself more wine and fingered the finely carved wine glass that held it. "On whether or not you prepare for them. If you are unprepared, they will kill you. If you are ready for them, their chances are not nearly so great."

"Prepared for them?"

"Well," Mordoth said, shrugging his tiny shoulder and tilting his overlarge head to one side, "you know about their coming now. Should you choose to prepare for it—set traps, shall we say—you could easily overpower them and save your life."

"I see what you mean. And I thank you. I would have died without the warning."

"You may still die. I cannot always help you. I do not see all of the future, only moments of it."

"What else can you see?"

"Cheryn is safe in the castle."

"But doesn't Lelar torture her?"

"No. He has something more sinister in mind."

"What?"

"You won't like it."

"Tell me anyway."

"He means to take her as his mistress."

"As Queen?"

"No, just as a private lover."

This time he did jump up, and he did crack his head on the low ceiling. Cursing, he sat down, rubbing his head and pounded his free fist into a pillow. "He can't do that! I'll kill him!"

"If only you could," Mordoth said wishfully. He was evidently thinking of the tortures and pain he had experienced at the hands of the mad king, and it was obvious that he would joyfully welcome the old Talented's demise.

"You must do something!" Jake pleaded.

"I cannot move against him," Mordoth said sadly. "And I doubt that you can. Though, if he can't harm you, you have one thing working to your advantage. You must simply avoid the manbats."

"You can save me more time on my quest," Jake said.

"What would you know?"

"Where in the castle will I find her?"

Mordoth frowned, started to answer, then suddenly stopped short. "King Lelar!" he whispered urgently. Then his mouth fell open like a gate, and his eyes glazed.

"*You have betrayed me, Mordoth!*" a booming voice said in the room. But the voice came out of Mordoth's throat, and it was not Mordoth's voice.

The dwarf's face reddened. His hands came up and clutched frantically at his head. He tried to scream, but Lelar held control of his vocal cords through his long distance magics. The skin around Mordoth's lips and nostrils began to blacken. His eyes went abruptly bloodshot, and the whites began to turn brown. He was like a fuse slowly burning

out. The blackness spread from his nostrils and covered his entire face until he was a figure of ash. His eyeballs flamed, leaving his sockets empty. Mordoth was surely dead.

Still, the voice came from his cracked and bleeding lips. *"And now you, my friend."*

Fire burst all around Jake, but none of it touched him. The floors and walls of the room began smouldering.

"Die, damn you!" Lelar's voice boomed.

The walls caught and leapt into flames. The floor followed their example. Jake turned and found the manhole, started down it quickly, coughing on the thick smoke.

The ruined dwarf figure of Mordoth, though physically dead, followed him, powered by Lelar's magics. It started down the rungs, pale hands gripping, bare, pale feet stepping from rung to rung.

He reached the steps beside the carved walls and took them two at a time into the enormous ballroom where the stalactites and stalagmites carried the flame from the room above. Lelar as Mordoth followed, hurling bolts of lightning and fire after him. But they bounced off his back without igniting him, setting the Great Tree on fire instead. He crossed the ballroom at a dead run, the struggling corpse slithering and scraping after him.

"Stop!" Lelar shouted. *"I'll condemn you to damnation!"*

But that was a power even beyond Lelar.

Jake found the mouth of the tunnel through which he had entered and started down the corridor. The dwarf appeared in the entrance behind him. Mordoth's clothes were afire, and his hands were alive with tiny flames. He took a step

forward, trying to continue, but the body was hopelessly ruined. It collapsed. Only its voice remained, calling after the disappearing figure with the long hair and the walnut shell necklace.

"I'll condemn you to damnation."

"I'll condemn you to damnation."

"I'll condemn you to damnation ."

Chapter Fourteen: MANBATS AT MIDNIGHT

THEY HAD LEFT the Great Tree with haste, for once the townspeople saw the smoke and realized the fantastic growth was going up in flames, his life would be worthless. When the bartender found that Mordoth was dead, when he saw the corpse or the smoke-yellowed bones of the dwarf, he would spread Jake's description through the immediate territory, and he would most likely be killed on sight or—worse—bound, gagged, and tortured until he died. They would not be easy on the man who killed their patron saint. It would be useless trying to explain that Lelar had killed the Talented. These people would want blood, and not being able to get Lelar's, they would take Jake's as a useable substitute.

But there were also the manbats to worry about. Mordoth had said they would attack this night, which meant he and Kaliglia must find a decent place to camp, one that was defensible. They found it, several hours later, tucked in the edge of a woods. There was a high stone cliff at the end of a blind pathway with trees on the other two sides of it. Near the cliff, the trees arched and met overhead, blocking out perpendicular descent by the manbats. They could come in to the clearing only one way, straight on. They

stopped here and set about building the defenses that Jake had in mind . . .

Jake had built a roaring fire after all else was done, and he stacked logs and leaves and dried vines next to it to feed it with. The manbats would find him no matter how hard he tried to conceal his whereabouts, so there was little sense in doing without a fire. Besides, the manbats could see well at night, and he could not. The fire enabled him to see clearly the area of the immediate campsite while being bright enough to worry the eyes of the manbats.

He lay beside Kaliglia, back against the cliff, as if he were asleep, though his eyes were slightly open, and his breathing was much too light and excited to be that of a sleeping man. They had finished the defenses long after dark, and he had been constantly worried that the flap of wings would sound before things had been finished, that he would feel the rake of sharp claws down his back and die with his miserable weapons system incomplete, a thing for the manbats to ponder over and laugh at, a thing left to rot in the woods—with his corpse. But they had finished after all and now had only to wait. His watch told him it was midnight when they heard the rustle of leathery wings and the hissed calls of the demon beasts as they circled overhead, looking for a way through the trees.

Kaliglia pushed on his feet and tensed, ready to leap up and sideways when Jake gave the order.

Jake tensed, put his hand on the trigger string of his device he had spent all of the afternoon and evening preparing, placed his other hand on his thob sword.

The manbats alighted beyond the trees and came through the opening just as he planned. There were—nine of them that

he could see, but they had most likely come in a detail of a dozen. The missing trio would be drifting about overhead, waiting as back-up forces in the event the nine decided they needed help, or as scouts to flee if the nine decided they could not overcome their opposition. But they would be very confident. His young witch was gone and could no longer help him, could no longer fry his opponents in the air, turn them into ash before they touched claw to him. And the hag was not there either; she could not deter them from tearing him to small bloody pieces. Yes, they would be very confident indeed. They would come rushing in without fear. And that was just what he wanted them to do.

They started walking toward the fire, squinting, hunched and scuttling, their razor claws rattling against the slate and gravel that strewn the ground here. They hissed back and forth, exchanging viewpoints, issuing suggestions and orders, splitting into two groups that clung to opposite sides of the narrow pathway. But that would do them little or no good.

Jake pulled lightly on the rope made of vine fibers, felt it go taut. That was ready. He just had to give it a stiff, sudden jerk, and . . .

The manbats cautiously entered the cavern formed by the interlocking tops of the trees. They were no more than forty feet away, their black-black eyes gleaming with reflected flecks of the blazing campfire. He fancied he could almost smell their stinking breath, almost feel their cold skin against his, their sharp claws drawing his blood. But he shook his head and concentrated on the plan . . .

They were in the target area.
He waited another few seconds.
They advanced a few more steps.

He pulled the rope, leaping to his feet and drawing his thob sword at the same moment. He had made his play now. If his device failed, it was certainly the end for him, certainly the end for Cheryn too.

The manbats cried out when they saw him, stopped their advance and hissed to one another, trying to decide what to do next, whether to advance recklessly in a single group, relying on their superior number to overpower him before he could kill many of them, or to stalk him and worry him until he opened himself for a death blow, as he surely would if they tired him enough.

Kaliglia bumbled erect, his long neck swinging to and fro.

And then the rocks fell.

It had only been a split second since he had tugged the rope and jumped to his feet, but the second had somehow become involved in a time warp, and it seemed as if minutes had passed instead. For a moment, he had been afraid that his device had failed and that death was the only logical end to this little confrontation. But that was not to be so.

He had spent all afternoon and evening constructing a net of vines and slinging it above, between the arched trees that shielded the trail, rigging a trigger rope that collapsed the net when jerked abruptly. Then he had searched about through the woods and adjoining clearings and had collected over two hundred stones which he distributed evenly in the net so that no matter where one stood on the pathway below, the stones were bound to strike him. Now the net collapsed as it was meant to, and the stones fell, bouncing off the heads and shoulders of the manbats. All nine went down under the heavy hail, screaming in fright.

Jake leaped around the fire and came

upon them after the stones had stopped falling. All of them were down and bleeding, but not all of them were dead. To his left, one of the demons groaned, hissed, and wobbled erect, holding its head in its clawed, bony hands. He ran forward and thrust the blade of the thob sword deep into the beast's chest, twisting it as he did so. The manbat shrieked, gurgled, dribbled blood through his thin lips, and toppled backwards onto the ground. Jake drew the sword out of the demon and whirled to the others. Four of them were obviously dead, their heads split by the avalanche. But another four were only groggy and would be standing and calling for help shortly. He moved among them, ramming the sword into them and finishing them off before they could be a greater menace to him. But the last shrieked out a string of what could have been words, and he knew as he plunged the blade through the mutant's neck that it had summoned the three above. He hoped there were only three . . .

Kaliglia had moved to his pre-arranged spot while Jake had finished off the manbats felled by the stones, and now they were prepared with their second bit of strategy. Kaliglia had moved through the woods to a spot farther down the trail. If the other three manbats landed, they would be trapped between the thob sword and the angry dragon, not a particularly pleasant or healthful position.

There was a screeching and a fluttering, and the three alighted on the trail, eyes blazing with an impossible black hue that was fractured with yellow as the flames reflected in the pitch orbs. They hurried forward, screeching angrily and waving their clawed hands about. Jake raised the sword as they came in

under the canopy of trees and signaled Kaliglia to make his move.

The dragon could be surprisingly quiet when he wanted to be. He moved out of the forest onto the trail behind the manbats, and they appeared not to have heard a thing.

Jake backed toward the fire and the cliff, hoping to gain time until Kaliglia was in position to move.

The manbats came on, chittering . . .

Hissing . . .

Yellowed fangs wet with saliva, almost glowing in the firelight . . .

Then Kaliglia moved. He swung his huge head around, mouth open, and collided with the three manbats, knocking the trio off their feet. His jaws closed over one of the creatures, and his square, blunt, vegetarian's teeth crushed the frail body. He spat it out and repeated the maneuver on a second of the demons.

But the third was up and running toward Jake. It flapped wings, leaped into the air and came down at him, claws extended. He thrust the thob sword above his head and speared the thing through one of its legs. It yelped, pulled back, and flapped in a circle, dropped again like one of the stones out of the net. He didn't have time to bring up the sword again, and it sprawled him onto the ground, rolled over and beyond him, into the fire. It screamed, rushed back out . . .

And Kaliglia settled his jaws onto its squirming form, crushing it and spitting it back into the fire.

Then there was silence. All twelve of the enemy were dead.

Chapter Fifteen: LELAR'S CASTLE

AFTER THEY HAD dragged the

bodies of the manbats into the brush and concealed them from the sight of later patrols, Jake and Kaliglia decided, being exuberant from the success of their fight and quite some distance from that unreal land of sleep, to go on in the darkness and reach the Castle Lelar before morning, hiding out nearby so that when further squads of manbats were sent to search for them, they would not so easily be discovered. The king would hardly expect them to have survived the first attack, let alone survived it *and* marched all night to the castle. So they set forth, Jake upon the giant's back, lumbering along the main trail in the darkest hours of the morning.

The Castle was magnificent. They moved off the trail into the edge of the woods and stared at it for a time, taking in the tremendous walls that thrust two hundred feet into the dawn. The walls were of polished green-black stone and seemed not to be chipped, cracked, or weathered in any way, smooth and flawless. The strange rock picked up the yellows and oranges of the morning and reflected them as yellows and greens, shimmering like the wet hide of some alien beast. The windows were long and narrow and barred with extensions of the wall, as if the windows had been whittled from the wall with the bars left in by the careful whittler. Blue light, psi light, played behind the bars in many of the rooms. The people of the castle woke early, it appeared. The drawbridge was up, a great expanse of gray-brown wood held on brass chains.

Horse-drawn carts driven by well-dressed servants left from the gate, moved down the drawbridge and up the dusty road toward the nearest town to purchase food and cooking wood. The gate was manned by four guards in

dapper green and blue uniforms reminiscent of the outfit of a matador, tight and shiny, rich yet somehow simple.

To the right of the castle was the great stone tower that served as an aviary for the manbats. There was a low chittering from its dark portals, and a few manbats swept in and out as the minutes ticked past, zooming toward the thick walls, braking with controlled flaps of their wings, and settling through the round, uncovered windows that punctuated the walls all around and at all heights.

"Nothing to do but sleep," Jake said. "When darkness comes, we can go in the castle. But we have to wait till then."

"I'm tired anyway," Kaliglia agreed.

Sleep came swiftly . . .

When they woke, the sun had set and they were hungry. But there was not time to be wasted getting food. Kaliglia could munch on anything handy as long as he did not cause too much noise with his chewing. Jake would go hungry. The important thing was to get inside the castle, find Cheryn, and get through the portal, back into his own worldline. He could eat once all that was done.

"Keep your sense of direction," Kaliglia warned. "You'll need it when Cheryn has to blast a pathway into the castle for me. She'll want to knock out the right wall on the first try. It might get rather awkward if she had to blow out several before she got the right one."

"I'll remember."

"How do you plan to get in?"

Jake looked over the castle with its great ramparts, huge towers, glistening walls, impregnable windows. "I'll have to go in through the front door. The stone bars on the windows rule out anything else."

"The guards—"

Jake shrugged. "I'll worry about them when I get there." He hunched at the edge of the woods, took a deep breath, and darted across the open space toward the first copse of brush. He skidded into that on his belly and lay breathing heavily, waiting for the guards to shout, waiting for the first lance to penetrate the brush and run him through. But seconds went by, then minutes, and he knew that he was safe—so far.

He looked over his shoulder. He could just barely see Kaliglia's face. The brute was stretched out on the forest floor and had shoved his snout to within inches of the dark perimeter of the wood. His eyes caught a sliver of the castle psi-light as he watched his human comrade advance.

Jake looked back to the castle and studied the situation. There were two guards at the castle door, the inner edge of the drawbridge. During the daylight hours, there had been two others at the outer limits of the bridge, one stationed to each side with pennant and lance, standing at attention. But these had been merely for pomp to impress visitors, and they had been removed with the coming of night. It was a half-hearted defense. Lelar had no fear for his privacy. Who would dare to violate the castle of the mightiest Talented in the world? No one, certainly. Except Jake. And they would think he was dead—or had turned tail and run to avoid the vicious manbats sent after him. The two guards talked and joked, and their laughter carried across the moat to where he lay in the copse. It might be possible to catch them unawares with his thob sword. The big problem now was getting to them without being seen.

The drawbridge was to the left of the copse, a good two hundred feet of completely barren land. Even if he could run it noiselessly, they were sure to spot

the movement and pick him off before he got close enough to swing the thob blade. To his right was a shallow stream that spilled down steps and fed the moat before draining out in a similar spillway on the other side. If he could get to the stream and crouch in the bed, perhaps he could reach the moat and cling to its banks where the shadows of the castle and the black water would conceal his movements.

The guards laughed again. One produced a bottle, and they shared a drink of wine. That was all for the better. A little drunk, they would be easier to handle.

He tensed, clutched his sword in his right hand, and got to his knees. He worked himself into a crouch. Without further thought, he moved to the right, stumbling once on a rock, and rolled into the stream bed, his heart pounding and his hand gripped achingly tight around the hilt of his weapon. It seemed impossible that the two guards had not heard him when he tripped over the rock, but they still laughed and shared the bottle. It was going to be easy. He could see that much.

He waited a while to regain his composure. It was not going to be possible to run down the stream bed. There were hardly any banks at all. If he crouched, they would see him here almost as easily as if he were crossing open land. The sword held to his side, he began wriggling forward on his stomach as he had seen soldiers do in war movies back in his own worldline. The noise seemed tremendous, like an avalanche as he slid over the stones, the water slapping against him, gurgling loudly. But the guards were a good distance off, and whatever shuffling sounds did reach them would most likely blend in with the normal background

noises of the night.

When he came to the spillway where the stream tumbled into the moat, he crawled out onto the moat bank where shadows completely concealed him, and took a moment to gather his strength.

Then he came to his feet and ran on his toes, never going back on his heels for fear of making noise, until he had come to the edge of the drawbridge where the shadows very suddenly ceased to exist and light from the courtyard spilled out through the gate, illuminating the night. There was no chance he could conceal himself any longer. He summoned his courage, held the sword before him, and leaped onto the bridge, crossing the last few steps to the guards, and swinging his sword on the nearest. It was as good on real objects as it was on thobs. It bit into the sentry. The man shuddered, gagged, fell away with blood pouring out of him.

Jake whirled on the second to bring home another fatal blow when, abruptly, a fist caught him on the jaw and sent him reeling backwards, almost into the moat. He shook his head, swung the sword to deliver a solid blow. The second guard drop-kicked him in the chest, sending him over the edge of the planking into the pitch, cold waters below.

Suffocating . . .

Darkness . . .

He beat his way to the surface and spat out the water that was in his mouth, coughed again and again to clear his lungs. The thob sword was still in his hand, and he clutched it tightly now as something brushed by him beneath the surface of the moat.

"Bandit!" The guard was shouting from the bridge above. "Bandit! Bandit!"

There were answering shouts from the castle, the slap-slap of feet on the courtyard cobblestones.

Jake turned toward the shore, treading water. But there was something in his way. A long snout and two yellow eyes belied the calm of the water and gave evidence of some rather ugly form like an iceberg beneath the surface.

He brandished his sword.

The beast didn't move. It lay on the water like a log with only the knob of its head showing.

Above, more servants clattered onto the bridge, some with torches. The moat and the surrounding area was brightly lighted now. Jake could see that the beast was some form of alligator.

Someone above said something, and everyone laughed.

The beast began moving in.

Jake backstroked to the wall.

The beast kept coming.

When his shoulderblades touched the castle stone, he knew there was nowhere for him to go. Except down. He clenched the sword and frantically tried to plan his actions in the coming minutes. There was only one thing he might do. It could just possibly work.

He treaded water, waiting.

The beast stopped moving in directly and began a back and forth movement that brought him in more slowly. It was an attempt to hypnotize him, Jake knew. Another animal, less intelligent than a human being, would carefully follow the left-to-right motion until it was somewhat numbed with the repetition. Then, when it was least aware, the beast would zoom in for the kill. He would have to keep himself sharp.

The drawbridge was almost full of spectators now. They elbowed one another for better vantage points.

The beast attacked!

He dived.

The water was so dark that he could see

little but shadows. Had it not been for the torchlight above, even shadows would have been imperceptible.

The beast swung around, surprised. It was directly over him, now. He rammed the sword upward and gouged out its belly.

It dived after him.

His chest ached for air.

The beast brushed his side, not seeing him, turned abruptly when it realized what it had touched.

He smashed the sword into its snout.

The beast flailed mindlessly now.

Jake surfaced and drew in a great gulp of air.

The crowd on the bridge roared approval when they saw him, and he wondered why. Then something brushed his legs again, and he whirled to see a second of the alligator creatures gliding through the water behind him. The moat, he suddenly realized, was full of them. He could kill one—maybe even two or three, but he could not hold out forever. Sooner or later, and most likely sooner, his arms would get tired from hacking with the sword, from keeping him above the water. His legs would grow weary with treading. He would not be able to hold them off. They would circle like vultures and finally devour him.

The beast darted at him.

He dived again.

But it had been coming in for a bite of its dead companion. It dived too, ripped into the other alligator corpse, and ignored Jake. It would not last for long. Others would be coming, and there would not be enough dead meat for all of them. He turned to rise, jumped as he was confronted with another dark shadow in the murky gloom. He waited for the bite of razor teeth, but the shadow didn't move. He realized, suddenly, that he was

beside the wall and that the black mark he was seeing was a hole in it big enough for a man to get through. With the last air in his lungs, he shoved himself inside the castle wall and swam upward, seeking desperately for air.

He broke surface in a dark cellar whose floor was covered with water. There was absolutely no light in here, and he stayed where he was, bobbing, hoping his eyes would adjust sufficiently to allow him to navigate. After five minutes or so, he realized there was just not enough light to see adequately. He would have to feel his way about. Keeping one hand against the slime-covered stones of the wall, he moved along, not quite knowing what he was looking for. When he found it, he knew it was the right thing: stairs.

He kicked onto them and lay breathing heavily, too exhausted to find out, for the moment, where they led. All that mattered was that he had escaped from the moat, from the alligators with the fine, sharp teeth. To the onlookers at the drawbridge, it would appear as if the second beast had gotten him. They would have seen him go down, the beast dive over him, and his failure to reappear. There would be no search parties, for they would expect no remains, let alone a living, breathing man. He was inside the castle, a free agent, just as he had set out to be; though the process had been bungled, the result was the same.

When his breath returned, he got up and followed the stairs upward until he came to a small landing. From there, the steps went in two directions, to the left and the right, obviously following the wall of the castle, providing secret passage behind every room in the structure. There was light here too. At several points in both directions, there were exits from the stairs through fireplaces that led into

other rooms in the castle. Light poured through these fireplaces and dimly illuminated the secret passages.

He chose the stairway to the left, followed it to its end and found no fireplace that gave access to a room where Cheryn might be. He went back to the landing then and moved along the right stairs. At the third point of egress, when he hunkered down to peer around the baffolding and through the fireplace grating, he saw her sitting at a vanity, combing her hair.

Chapter Sixteen: THE PORTAL BETWEEN THE WORLDS

HE WAS ABOUT to venture forth and announce himself when the door opened and a woman servant entered the chamber. She closed the door after her and approached Cheryn. She was a fat, middle-aged shrew with thin lips and tiny, beady eyes set on sides of a beak of a nose. "The King will see you now," she said to Cheryn.

"Tell him to go to hell!" Cheryn snapped, slamming the comb down on the vanity top.

"Little lady—" the woman began in a condescending manner.

"Go to hell yourself," Cheryn said.

"When the king chooses a woman," the servant said, "that woman should be grateful to be of service to him. Now you will come with me and no further dilly-dallying."

Jake's ears pricked, and his face grew red. So Lelar had seen the beauty, had appreciated the form of this girl and had immediately set out to conquer her. He

would pay for that some day. Jake wriggled around the false wall and into the fireplace. The servant woman had her back to him, her hands on her hips as she regarded Cheryn.

"If you think so mighty much of the king," Cheryn hissed, "why don't you be his mistress? Could it have anything to do with all that fat hanging on you?"

The servant woman slapped Cheryn's face. "I'm a Talented too, little girl. And now that the king has once checked your powers, the pathway is open for any Talented to do it. So if you want yourself made helpless, I can do it. And then I can give you more than an open hand on the face. I know how to hit to keep you from bruising. The king would never have to know—since he wouldn't believe you."

Jake pushed the grate quietly aside and entered the room.

Cheryn saw him at once, struggled to restrain a smile that would give him away. Instead, she turned her attention back to the fat woman and concentrated on drawing her attention. "I don't mind being punished if I'm telling the truth. You're a gross, flabby, moose of a woman, and you know it!"

The woman slapped her again. And again.

"Fat!" Cheryn screeched.

Slap!

Jake knew the folly of trying to manhandle this woman, for she was a Talented and beyond his puny Commoner powers. But he could throw her off balance just long enough to give Cheryn a chance to overpower her and knock her out. He sneaked up behind her, carefully, reached out, dug his fingers into her sides, and tickled her fiercely.

The woman danced wildly, flailing at the surprise and the mirthful sensation. In the few seconds she was off guard,

Cheryn grabbed a bottle of sweet smelling toilet water from the vanity, swung it, broke it over her head. Perfume showered over Jake. The woman staggered, half turned, and fell full length on the floor. Her psionic powers wouldn't do her any good until she regained consciousness, which would be enough time for them to escape.

"Where did you come from?" Cheryn asked.

"I'll show you," Jake said, grabbing her hand. "We haven't much time. She'll be out only a few minutes."

He led her to the fireplace, around the concealing partition, and into the stairwell behind the wall. "There's an opening into the throne room," he said, taking her down the steps to the landing and halfway up the next set. He hunkered down and peered around the wall into the fireplace and beyond. The throne room was empty. "Come on."

They moved through the fireplace into the room and up to the wall where the portal shimmered eerily.

"Which is the wall that faces Kaliglia?" she asked.

He turned, grimaced. Finally: "That one."

She turned to it, squinted, gritted her teeth. A few seconds went by when nothing seemed to happen. Then, abruptly, there was a huge hole in the wall. The stones had disappeared just as the attacking manbats had that time at the gorge. Across the field, Kaliglia lumbered out of the forest. He ran awkwardly, but fast.

Abruptly, shouted alarms echoed through the building. The sound of running feet echoed in the big hall.

"They couldn't have heard me," Cheryn said.

"The woman upstairs has gotten up,"

he said. "A little sooner than we planned."

A manbat scuttled into the room, saw them, turned to run back out.

Cheryn burned him out of existence.

Kaliglia reached the moat, crashed into the water, splashing bucketsful into the throne room. He reached the wall and struggled to raise himself and pull through. For a moment, it seemed as if he would not make it. One of the alligator beasts snapped at his rear quarters, was discouraged when its teeth didn't damage the thick hide of the dragon. Then, kicking, he was through into the throne room. They hurried across the vast floor to the wall where the portal waited.

Half a dozen more manbats and three human guards came into the room.

"Quick!" Jake shouted, grabbing Cheryn by the hand. He leaped into the wall with her. Kaliglia followed, bleating madly.

Chapter Seventeen: HOMECOMING

THE SMOKE GHOSTS did not appear—immediately.

There was only darkness, a swirling of various hues of black and gray that served to keep them in ignorance of their whereabouts, illuminated nothing, gave view to no concrete objects. They were in a land of nothingness, of shapelessnesses, of vast expanses of hollowness. The only thing that proved a link to reality was the fresh, cool air and the stiff wind that sucked them across the gloom like the intake of a vacuum cleaner until the light in the castle wall was only as large as a dime suspended at arm's length in the

blackness. Then it became only a pin prick, then was gone completely. They floated in a chain, Jake in the lead, Cheryn in the middle, holding onto his hand, and the looming hulk of Kaliglia close behind like some oddly structured battleship. Evidently, when an object from one of the worldlines was dropped into the gulf between realities, the force from the opposite gate pulled that object across the gulf and into the second worldline. In any event, there was an irresistible force drawing them towards another speck of light that was still a pin prick thousands of miles ahead. When Jake had originally crossed, through the aid of the PBT, he had evidently short-circuited the route, come around the gulf or crossed it in one leap. He was thinking how much more pleasant that method had been when the Smoke Ghosts came . . .

The Smoke Ghosts were, it seemed, members of the life form that inhabited this bleak landscape between concrete realities. They were of the same substance as the gloom, though lighter in color—a dusty, gray-white ash. They were shapeless, though they tried to assume the human form when they touched Jake or Cheryn and the dragon form when they were toying with Kaliglia. They formed fingers and paws and touched the three travellers as if examining experimental animals to see the effects of a new drug. Jake watched as the mist beasts penetrated his skin with their insubstantial fingers, shivered as he felt them exploring his insides, touching his organs, gently examining the things that made him tick. Cheryn's hand trembled in his as she felt the beasts doing the same to her. He held her hand more tightly, partly to reassure her and partly to reassure himself. He was glad he had

someone to hold onto, someone to share the horror with. At least sound traveled in the gloom, and he could whisper to her and help steady her nerves. They discovered that sound traveled when Kaliglia bellowed at the first sight of the Smoke Ghosts. It had been a booming, wild, uncontrolled shriek that split the blackness in half.

The light ahead was growing . . .

Growing . . .

As large as a dime . . .

A quarter . . .

A fist . . .

Suddenly they were streaking out of the darkness and tumbling through into brilliant daylight, rolling over and over down a small hill in soft, lush, green grass. Colors had never had so much meaning before, never been so vibrant and exciting. The light hurt their eyes so that they had to squint, but when they gained full sight, they could see they were in a small park and that it was summer. Birds crossed the sky in perfect formation; bees hummed about, stopping at nearby blossoms and delving into the sweet liquors of the flowers. Beyond the tall, heavily-leaved trees, the tops of city buildings could be seen, gray and massive, the sun glinting off hundreds of windows. And the children . . .

Children came running from the swings and playground equipment, children of all sizes and shapes, colors and creeds, but all having the one common denominator of wonder: wonder at the dragon that had appeared out of thin air. They bounded up the slope to the middle of the hill where the trio had come to a stop, and they circled them in a half moon. Some of the children were afraid of Kaliglia, others were not, but none of them was going to miss his chance to see a real live dragon at close range.

"Is he tame?" a brown-haired boy of about eight asked Jake.

"Is who tame?"

"The dinosaur."

Jake grinned suddenly and looked at Kaliglia. Somehow, he had forgotten what a sensation the beast would be in this worldline. "Yeah, son. Yeah, he's tame enough."

"Could I ride him?" the boy asked.

Kaliglia chuckled.

"Can he?" Jake asked.

"Sure," Kaliglia said.

The children were speechless.

Jake lifted the eight year old while Kaliglia settled to his knees and sat him on the base of the dragon's neck. "Hold on to the scales," he said, "but be careful you don't get your fingers pinched in them."

Kaliglia lumbered away up the hill, turned at the top, and lumbered back down. By that time, the other children were shouting and pushing, all anxious to be next. Jake had to sort them out and line them up. He threatened, if they weren't orderly, that he would not allow them to ride the dinosaur. They quieted down at once and became perfect ladies and gentlemen.

Their mothers were not quite as mannerly. Just then some of the mothers who were in the park with their younger children started running from the equipment, screaming and waving their arms. "What's this?" Kaliglia asked.

"I think they're afraid for their little darlings. They don't trust dragons around here."

"They're going to take the kids away?" Kaliglia asked. "Before they even get to ride?"

"Looks that way."

Kaliglia grumbled, then raised his head. He opened the great, cavernous

mouth, and bellowed at the top of his stentorian voice, straight at the running mothers. The blast shook the ground and whined out like a rusty fire siren and the noise from an avalanche mixed together. In the space of three feet, every one of the advancing mothers turned and ran wildly back toward the equipment, to the gate, and out of the park.

Jake laughed.

So did the children.

And Kaliglia.

They started the ride again, taking three children at once. There was the air of a carnival about the whole thing, and Jake realized Kaliglia would have made a prize catch for any circus. He would have to safeguard against that. Now, though, he relaxed and enjoyed the warm air, the bright sky, and the laughter of the children. Until the police came . . .

They drove right through the gates of the park in two cars, sirens going, red dome lights flashing. They roared up the graveled lane through the playground area and turned into the field where Kaliglia was giving rides. Both cars braked at the same moment, spewing dirt and stones and grass into the air over each other. The doors burst open and four city police got out.

"What are those things?" Cheryn asked, amazed.

"Police."

"No, no. The things they were in."

"Automobiles, machines. You've lost track of them in your worldline. They're as common as dragons are in your worldline."

"I must see how one works," she said.

"You'll get your chance."

The police rushed up the hill, guns drawn, and stopped behind Jake and Cheryn. They stood, watching the great beast carry the children up the hill,

unable to speak. Finally, one of them, a burly man with shoulders as wide and straight as a heavy plank, said, "Hey, you!"

Jake turned to him. "Me?"

"Yeah. What's going on here?"

"We're giving the children rides on our dragon," Jake said, savoring the slapstick situation for all it was worth.

"Dragon," the cop said. It wasn't a question and hardly a statement. It came out between his lips somewhat like a sigh, somewhat like a gasp.

"Dragon," Jake repeated, grinning.

"Well what's a dragon doing here?"

"Giving the children rides."

Suddenly the burly policeman grabbed Jake by the shirt and twisted him around, lifting him nearly off the ground. "I don't have to take smart talk from hippies!" the cop snapped. "Now you come across with some answers quick." Jake coughed, sucked in breath. The cop shook him harshly until his hair flew all about his head and his walnut shell necklace clattered wildly. "Quick, I said!"

Abruptly, the cop's fingers left go of Jake's shirt and turned on the cop's own uniform. They laced themselves on his shirt and tugged. In another second, he was hanging in the air as if he had lifted himself with his own hands. His hands shook him. One of them let go of his shirt and slapped his face.

"Hey! Hey!" the cop shouted.

The other police had drawn their guns.

Cheryn dropped the lead officer, turned on the others. In a moment, they were all hanging in the air, all held by their own hands. Then, in perfect unison, each officer began to slap his own face, helpless against Cheryn's psi powers. She gave each one a good shaking up, then dropped them as she had the first. All four turned and ran, leaped into the cars. The cars

started, turned with a squeal of wheels, and roared out of the park, some of the doors still hanging open. When they hit the street, their sirens were going.

"No more of that," Jake said.

"What?" she asked innocently.

"No more Talent. You'll have to conceal it here. If you use it, they'll make a lab specimen out of you."

"But they—"

"No buts, wife."

"I'm not your wife, yet."

"You will be. And I don't want you using your Talent unless I tell you to. Understood?"

She sulked a moment. Then: "Okay. Understood. Yes, chief."

He grabbed her, slapped her behind, hugged her to him. They stood watching the children and the dragon. Kaliglia was having a tremendous time, perhaps better than the kids. He frolicked up and down the hill. Had he been able, he would have stood on his head to please them. For a time, everything was beautiful again. Until the second round of sirens broke the spell . . .

Chapter Eighteen: FUZZ

JUST BEFORE the patrolcars arrived, the police traffic copter fluttered overhead like some huge primeval dragonfly. There was a man leaning over the one doorsill with a rifle. Jake realized, suddenly, what the cop was trying to take a shot at: Kaliglia. But there were children on the dragon's back, and the man in the copter couldn't take a chance for fear he would hit the kids or—once he shot the dragon—it would roll over on

them in its death throes. He stopped sighting and held onto the rifle with one hand, waiting for the kids to get off. Then, roaring through the gates of the park, the police returned in force, six cars of them with four men to a car. They opened the doors and dropped behind them, using them for shields. Some left the cars and spread out in a great semicircle, closing in like commando troops from all angles, riot helmets gleaming bright crimson in the sunlight.

"What's this?" Cheryn asked. "What's happening?"

"My people have a flair for dramatics," Jake said, but he wasn't feeling as jovial as he sounded. He should have grasped the situation earlier, and he berated himself for his foolishness. A real, live dragon would cause quite a stir in a Twentieth Century city. He had seen all the movies, hadn't he? He had shivered in dark theaters, sopping up the campy American International films, the way-out slapstick Japanese things. *Gorgo*, *Godzilla*, the whole line of over-sized lizards mauling office buildings and devastating the Works of Man. And the police had seen them too. It was the only concept they had of a dragon now. A dragon, they were sure, had to be a ferocious, mindless, vicious monster bent on destruction, a horror that had to be stopped at all costs. And they were preparing the defense. They might even kill Kaliglia!

The helicopter drifted across the top of the hill, swept over Kaliglia. The huge beast looked at it friendly enough and bleated a jarring hello. The copter pilot panicked at the roar and pulled straight up, almost stalling the machine. It choked, sputtered, caught, and fluttered down the slope to hover over the patrolcars.

Kaliglia kneeled to discharge his passengers and pick up a new load.

"Don't let those kids get off!" Jake shouted.

Kaliglia stood up again.

The commandos were slithering up through the grass like snakes.

"Why not?" the dragon asked. "They've had their turn."

The commandos stopped dead.

One of the line shrieked and ran back toward the cars.

"Hold the line!" an officer shouted, but the commandos finally broke under the knowledge that the dragon could talk as well as any man, and every one of them ran pell mell back to the cars and cowered behind the doors, peering through the windows and around the edges, but not daring to step out in full sight.

"Never mind why not," Jake said. "Just keep them on your back."

The kids already on the beast yelled with glee and slapped the scaly hide of their dragon.

"There are only three more who haven't ridden," Kaliglia said. "Suppose I pick them up too?"

"Okay. Yeah. The more, the merrier."

Kaliglia bent and waited while the last three climbed up his side and lodged themselves on his hump, each clutching the child before him. Standing, Kaliglia stomped up the hill, bellowed when he got to the top and galloped around to give the kids a thrill.

"You there!" the officer who had been leading the commandos hollered.

"Me?" Jake asked, looking down the slope to the patrolcars.

"Yeah. You. Come here."

Jake winked at Cheryn and sauntered down to the cars. "Something I can do for you officers?"

"You know anything about that

dinosaur?"

"He's mine."

"Yours?"

"That's correct."

"He's tame?"

"Perfectly."

The cop stood up from behind the door and scratched his riot helmet before he realized he was wearing it. He still held his pistol with the safety off, but some of the tenseness was gone from his face. "Where the hell did you ever pick him up?"

"It's a long story."

"We have complaints from the mothers—"

"The children haven't been hurt."

"I'm afraid," the cop said, "that I'm going to have to take you in."

"Kaliglia too?"

"Who's that?"

"The dragon."

"Yeah. Him most of all."

It might be fun, Jake decided, to play along with all this for a while. He did not look at authority with quite as much loathing as did his New Left friends on campus. He had some respect, but mostly he was possessed with a humorous tolerance of them. It appealed to this sense of humor to lead them on for a while, at least until he could get in touch with Wilson Abrams, his trustee, and get the entire thing straightened out.

"No harm will come to him?" Jake asked.

"None. Not if he's tame like you say."

"Your men look awfully jumpy. I'm afraid their guns just might go off accidentally."

"I'll order them not to shoot," the officer said, puffing out his chest and squaring his jaw to show who was in command of this operation in the first place.

"Okay," Jake said, "but I think we'll have a little insurance first."

"Insurance?"

"I want three of your men to ride Kaliglia back to police headquarters."

"Wha—"

"Otherwise we don't go. If there are three of your men on him, that will dissuade anyone from shooting him. He could roll over and crush them if anyone got trigger happy."

The officer swallowed hard. He turned to the men who had been listening attentively, their weapons still drawn. "Holster your guns!" he shouted. They did so reluctantly. "Jackson, Barringer, Cleaver, front!" Three officers, all young, rushed up and saluted. "You'll ride the dinosaur back to headquarters," the officer said.

"But—" one of the rookies started to protest.

"Or I'll have your badges and your skins!" the officer roared. "Now move your asses!"

They followed Jake, apprehensively, back up the hill to where Kaliglia stood with the six children on his back. "You can let them down," Jake said to the dragon.

Kaliglia nodded and kneeled. The children climbed off, disappointed that the ride wasn't going to last even longer than it had. The police formed a line and, hesitantly, clambered up the flank of the beast and straddled his neck and horned ridge. They clasped each other like the children had and looked as if they would be sick any moment.

"You follow the police cars," Jake said. "We'll be in one of them."

"Is this all right?" Kaliglia asked.

The police blanched, and one nearly fell off.

"It's fine. They're just taking us in

because they don't know what else to do with us. When we get there, I'll call Wilson Abrams and he'll straighten everything out for us."

"Let's go, then," Kaliglia said.

"Oh, God," one of the policemen said. "Oh, God, oh God, oh God." They all took it up then, moaning low in their throats, their faces white, holding on to each other so tightly that they must have been breaking ribs.

"What a bunch of 'fraidy cats," Kaliglia snorted.

Jake and Cheryn got in the second police car, and Kaliglia, carrying the three officers, waddled up behind. The other four cars pulled around to the rear of the dragon. The first car started its siren, and the procession pulled through the playground and out into the streets, leaving the children behind on the hill.

Chapter Nineteen: MORE FUZZ

AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS, Kaliglia was led through an alleyway where his sides brushed both building walls, and placed in a large parking lot behind the stationhouse with eight cops left to watch over him. The three riding him scrambled down and hurried away to a safe distance.

"We'll be right inside this building," Jake said. "It shouldn't take too long. When I get Abrams, I'll have him fly right out here—wherever 'here' is—and get us out of this mess. If you need us, just bellow."

"Right," Kaliglia said. He wasn't afraid of the guns. He didn't really know what they were for.

Jake and Cheryn were led into the station to the front desk where a white haired officer was pacing back and forth, occasionally looking out the window at the bulk of Kaliglia standing at the far end of the parking lot. "Are these them?" he almost shouted when Jake and Cheryn came in.

"This is them," the officer from the park said.

"Book them at once!" the old cop said to the desk sergeant.

"Now wait a minute," Jake said.

"You—shut up!" the cop snapped.

"You can't talk to me like that!" Jake snapped back.

"I just did."

"What'll I book them on, chief?" the desk sergeant asked.

"Uh—" He looked them over. "Book the girl on a charge of indecency in public. That dress hardly covers anything."

"Goddamnit, now—" Jake began.

"And book him on swearing in public. Is there a law about swearing in public?"

"Somewhere. Real old," the desk sergeant said. "We used it when we wanted to hold that robbery suspect a few months ago. Remember?"

"Use it again," the chief said.

"I demand to make a phone call," Jake demanded.

"In time, in time," the chief said.

"I don't see why you had to book us, either."

"To hold you until they can get here."

"They?"

"This is far out of our league, sonny. Far out. The FBI is on the way."

Jake groaned.

Cheryn had been taken to a different room to await the coming of the Federal men, and Jake could imagine how boiling

mad she was, ready to blow, surely. He had thought she was going to use her magics on the police matron when the fat woman had propelled her through a door into a detention room. But she was obeying his orders to keep her Talent under wraps. It was a good thing too. If anyone ever found out what she could do, any future privacy they might hope to have would be a dream of ashes. The cops that reported being lifted into the air and having their faces slapped by their own hands would not be believed. It would be assumed that the confusion and the excitement at having found a real dragon had gotten them so mixed up that they couldn't be counted on for rational reports. But if Cheryn demonstrated the power once more, then someone would connect the incidents and the game would be lost. So far she was behaving herself. He just hoped the matron didn't use any other rough measures with the girl.

As he sat in the bare room, much like a cell, he began to be more and more afraid. They had called Abrams, and the lawyer was on his way, though doubtlessly confused about the talk of intelligent dragons that filled the conversation. They would certainly get off without much trouble. It was the dragon that he was worried for. What would the FBI make of that?

He was about to find out.

The door opened, admitted a short, muscular, well-dressed man in his mid-forties, closed behind him. He stood, looking at Jake a moment, shaking his head at the sight of the long hair and beard. Finally, he came across the room.

"My name is Connors. I'm from—"

"The FBI," Jake finished, refusing to shake the proffered hand.

"How—"

"The old man outside, the one that

plays around the edges of the law, let it slip."

"No matter," Conners said, pulling up the only other chair in the room. He swung it around and sat down backwards on it, crossing his arms on the back. He tilted his hat back on his head to give himself a jaunty look that, somehow, didn't go with the rest of his features. "Suppose you tell me what this is all about."

"Suppose you tell me," Jake said, "why we're being treated as criminals. I don't have to talk until my lawyer arrives."

"Very knowledgeable about the law, aren't we," Conners said nastily. He pushed open his coat to expose his gun. It was intended to send shivers down Jake's spine. It did too.

"I don't want trouble," Jake said.

"Fine, fine," Conners said, smiling. A crocodile smile. "We hoped you'd be a little more cooperative. I'm glad to see you're coming around. It's the smart thing. Really, it is."

"What do you want?"

Conners took his hat off and twirled it on one finger, ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth. "Just the story. Where'd a damn dragon come from? Was there anything in this report about policemen being levitated, anything else that might tie in?"

Jake shivered inwardly. Maybe, if they accepted a dragon in the Twentieth Century, they would accept stories of levitation too. He would have to lie around that, play for time until Abrams arrived. He could tell the basic story about the worldlines. The Federal man might or might not believe him. It would take up time, anyway. "It started with a drug," he said, and spent the next thirty minutes summing up his adventures in the other worldline where King Lelar was

even that minute planning domination of his own parallel world, planning to cross the gorge and annihilate the Sorceress Kell and those opposed to him.

When he stopped, the FBI man was pacing the room, looking out into the parking lot now and then at the looming mass of the dragon where it shuffled around before the guns of the nervous police. "It's ridiculous!"

"Give me another explanation for Kaliglia?"

Conners opened his mouth, closed it without saying anything. He paced some more, his hands locked behind his back, his feet clicking in a military manner against the cold tile floor. "No, it must be like you said. As crazy as it sounds, it must be something like that. Though I think you're holding out on me."

He had, of course. He had not mentioned anything about Cheryn's powers, had not told Conners that she was a Talented. "Well, that's it. Believe it or not," Jake said. "When my lawyer comes—"

"You won't be here," Conners said abruptly.

"What?"

"This is too important. Turnet, don't you see what this could mean? Do you see where this would put us if we could just reach into this other worldline and get a few of these Talented to cooperate with us against the Russians?"

Jake saw. "But they wouldn't cooperate."

"This Lelar sounds like he might."

"He'd take you over after he had used you," Jake said.

"I doubt that," Conners said. "They may have ESP, but you said they live in a primitive world. No cars, television. I doubt he could take us over."

"You idiot," Jake said, pounding his

fist into his palm.

"Come on," Conners said.

"Where?"

"You'll find out. Come on."

"What's to be done with the girl? The dragon?"

"The girl comes with us," Conners said.

"The dragon? Well, there's more like him where he came from. I guess we can feed him some narcotics, truss him up, and hand him over to some biology nuts. Seems to me a lot of universities would like to get their hands on him."

"I won't go," Jake said.

Conners drew his pistol. "We only need one of you. You or the girl. In fact, maybe we could do without both of you. I know how much of that drug PBT you took. You told me. I could re-create the scene now and go into this other worldline. So if you don't cooperate—"

Jake cursed himself. "I'll cooperate," he said.

"Let's go."

Conners pushed open the door, still holding his gun, and they went into the main duty room of the stationhouse. All Jake wanted now was to see Cheryn, to say one word to her, one important word. They stood waiting until the matron brought Cheryn out. She was flushed and angry—probably from a search by the matron and from the questioning of the second FBI man that was with her.

"Let's go," Conners said. "We have a car outside."

One word.

Cheryn looked at Jake beseechingly.

"Magics!" Jake shouted. "Quick!"

Conners whirled with his gun.

The second FBI agent drew his own pistol.

And both guns dissolved in their hands.

"Let's get to Kaliglia," Jake said, grabbing Cheryn's arm.

The stationhouse erupted in pandemonium. Conners grabbed for the girl, but his fingers struck something solid half a foot from her, and he could not get through it. The same thing happened when he reached for Jake. The desk sergeant was shouting. An alarm bell was ringing. A young officer, one of those who had ridden Kaliglia to the parking lot, ran for the weapons rack. But before he got there, every gun had turned to ashes.

"Quickly," Jake said, taking her hand. The invincible invisible shields did not obstruct him like they obstructed everyone else.

They ran out the door into the early evening coolness. Darkness was slowly creeping across the city, and the far edge of the sky was a dull orange from the sunset. Jake wished the people of his worldline were half as charming as their surroundings. They took the steps two at a time and ran around the building, down the alleyway toward the parking lot and the dragon.

"Halt!" an officer yelled from the end of the alleyway, his gun leveled at their stomachs.

Then his gun was gone, and he was grasping thin air.

They ran by him.

Kaliglia bleated happily when he saw them.

"Stop right there!" another cop shouted. "Men!" he ordered. The officers guarding Kaliglia turned and leveled their guns at the two approaching hippies. Then their guns too were gone, nothing but the faint trace of ash smears on their hands. Their commanding officer reacted more quickly than the rest and ordered them to grab Jake and Cheryn. They tried, smashing their hands uselessly against the shields.

Then they were next to Kaliglia, and

Cheryn extended the shield to cover all of them. Beyond, the lot was full of police. Sirens were moaning, bells ringing, men shouting excitedly.

"Some home you have here," she said.

He didn't answer. He had thought that her worldline was intolerable, a place where Talented ruled supreme and where Commoners cowered before the likes of Lelar, where the laws of nature could be disrupted at the whim of a sadistic esper. But her worldline, in reality, had something that his worldline lacked: wonder. It had a sense of wonder, a sense of fairy beauty that he had been too stupid to appreciate when he had been there. Here, in the 'real' world of Twentieth Century Earth Before Nuclear War, there were not many dreamers, not many who could appreciate magic and witches, wizards and warlocks and talking dragons. A talking dragon was something to be locked up in a zoo—maybe eventually dissected to satisfy the curiosity of bearded professors, to quench their thirst for facts, facts, facts. An esper was a potential weapon, not a potential healer, not a potential boon to mankind. A pathway into another worldline was a road to better means of destruction, a tool towards world domination. No, Cheryn's world was a better one, no doubt about it. It was a place of adventure for the sake of adventure, a place where a man's wits counted for a great deal, a place where magic was never taken for granted. And, discounting Lelar, a place where Talented used their psionic abilities for good, not evil. He wanted, more than anything, to go back.

"Some home I have here," he said, nodding sadly.

"Then do we go back to my worldline?" she asked.

"How? I can't walk out and ask for enough PBT to get us back. And we can't make it to the park and find the hole that we dropped out of."

"We don't need any of that. I can take us back."

"You what?"

"Can take us back. Something has happened to my Talent. It's larger than ever before. Before, I couldn't have created a shield big enough to shelter all of us. Now I'm doing it without strain. I think I could make a shield to cover the whole city and still have enough power to play games with your police."

"It must have something to do with passing between worldlines," he said.

"When that 'wind' was tugging on us," she said. "When we were coming through the gloom. I think it was that wind, though it might have even been the Smoke Ghosts. I felt them fiddling around inside of me."

"And you can open a portal for us? Now?"

"I think so."

"Do it, then!"

And she did. The spot before them turned dark, darker, pitch black. It grew until it was an enormous square directly before them. Slowly, the blackness retreated, and the square was filled with a scene of the Castle Lelar standing before them, manbats drifting about its towers. "Let's go," she said.

They moved through it, dropped less than a foot, and were standing in Lelar once again. The portal closed behind them.

"We must hide quickly before the manbats see us," Jake said, grabbing her arm.

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we are going to walk into the

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 137)

THE MOVEMENT

by GREG BENFORD

illustrated by GRAY MORROW

Greg Benford originally sold this story to the ill-fated Stellar. Several years have passed, but despite the quickening pace of social change in this country, the story remains frighteningly up to date, a grim double-forecast of things to come . . .

RAGAN LAY in the mud and heat and strained forward, trying to penetrate the night ahead of him. A drop of sweat traced a cool finger down his brow and was flicked off into the darkness by his breath when it reached his nostrils. Insects were hovering overhead with a low buzz, and every moment or two something would move nearby, diverting his attention.

Let them go. Some of them—particularly the night hunters, out on the prowl—had the weight to set off trip wires, so the guards couldn't use booby traps this far out from the perimeter.

"How's the time?"

He looked over at the big Negro lying beside him. Jake was only a few feet away, but he was almost invisible in this light. Ragan glanced down at his wristwatch.

"A few more minutes. See anything?"

"No. They don't like to light up the area around the fence, do they?" A slow, deep voice.

"That's standard Army practice, lately. They need to check for what the manuals call perimeter integrity, and

nobody likes to do it under arc lights when there might be snipers in the bush fifty yards away."

Clouds were boiling in from the ocean, blotching out the hint of starlight that made the sky a hard blue. The lights of the buildings in the compound ahead danced in the warm air rising from the ground, still cooling.

"Been a long time since I went in on one of these," Jake whispered. "Two years. I'm tired of throwing a Molotov cocktail and running for it. We didn't try to hit this one, though, because of the fence."

"If your description of it is accurate, we shouldn't have any trouble." Off to the right at the edge of the forest a bird sang a tropical song to itself.

"It's okay. I got right up to it last week to make those sketches, and one of the men who has his crops near the other side says they haven't made any changes since, near him. But they don't let Brazilians walk up and get a good look at it, so that's all we know."

Ragan shifted uncomfortably in the mud to redistribute the weight of the pack he carried. "I hadn't expected it to be this hard. Just luck that I brought all

the gear when I left the States. The Army seems to be using high-powered equipment for such a small base."

Jake grinned in the darkness. "They're getting scared. After a few places in the States caught it, they took us seriously. They know as well as we do that NASA can't take a breakdown in its network."

Ragan motioned him to be silent. He'd known Jake only two weeks, while the men trained for this mission, and he liked him. But the other man had been out in the back country too long. All he had had to take on were district policemen who might get suspicious about a big Negro with an American accent, whose papers said he was from Haiti. Dealing with a trained military force was something else, and apparently Jake knew it. He talked too much, a sure sign of nervousness.

Ragan checked his watch and took one last semicircular sweep of the area, keeping his eyes fixed to use his peripheral vision. The only lights were those of the living quarters on the base, a good half mile away. The defensive zone, a raw field cleared of vegetation, lay between them and the buildings.

His mouth had a sour taste in it, part anxiety, he knew—and part fear.

He gave a signal and crawled forward, breathing the hot, moist air and inching up the incline. Jake followed behind and slightly to the left. The weight of the pack was beginning to make itself felt and the mud, starting to harden with the coming of night, pulled with liquid fingers.

Every few minutes they stopped and listened. The small animal rustlings around them were enough to blot out the quiet murmur of the ocean a mile away, and they caught no other sound.

They moved directly toward the lights. The barbs of small bushes plucked at Ragan's black coveralls and slowed his



progress.

What do you mean you're interested in politics? Running around with a sign and never touching a book, never learning how to make an honest dollar, that's what you mean by politics. Didn't send you to school to shoot off your mouth, and don't talk back, you . . .

He didn't see the fence until it was two feet from his face, looming up suddenly like a spider web in the darkness. They turned and crawled parallel to it until he spotted one of the supporting posts.

Ragan rolled over onto his back and leaned against the pillow his pack made. In the dim light from the base the field of dead trees and scrub they had crossed was a primitive brown sea lapping futilely at the rigid logic of the fence.

The other man moved a few feet away to keep watch. There was barely enough light to see the threads of brown wrapped around the heavy wires of the fence.

This was the heart of the perimeter defense. The brown threads were superconducting filaments. They were the latest antipersonnel gimmick to come out of the federal government's pet laboratories; Ragan had seen them once before in the States. The natives here had mentioned unusual activity around the fence several weeks ago, and he had guessed the troops were stringing a new sensor system.

The threads were especially effective because they were superconductors even at tropical temperatures. A decade ago the only known superconductors had been unusual alloys that had to be chilled to near absolute zero before they suddenly lost their electrical resistance. Somehow the physicists had found a way to raise the superconducting temperature. As far

as Ragan knew, the process was still a secret.

A superconductor has literally no resistance to current. This made the fence a very good detector. Cut a thread and it ceased conducting. Cut several and a technician could deduce from the complex pattern of the threads just where the break had occurred.

Superconducting elements made such a system practical and cheap. A computer cross-correlated small variations in the system due to the daily cycle in temperature and humidity, just to keep the chance of error low.

It was a formidable obstacle. Ragan didn't have the time to be suitably impressed, though, and anyway he had come prepared.

He rolled back a few feet, looked quickly around and opened the equipment pouch at his side. He reeled out a spool of the same brown threads and clasped the ends between two fingers.

He took out a small wire cutter and spliced his superconducting wires into the ones in the fence, starting near the earth and rising three feet in a vertical line. He did the same thing a few feet further away. The wires were long enough to trail down to the ground, along the fence and up to the same height again.

It took a few more moments to splice another reel into the superconducting network above and below the two vertical lines, forming a rectangle. Now the fence currents were running through the wires he had placed as well as through the usual fence circuits. When the fence was cut current would then flow through his wires alone. The electrical resistance would not vary so much as a flicker.

With ordinary copper conductors this bypassing would have been impossible. The computers would have noticed the

drop in total resistance when he put the new wires in parallel with the old.

Ragan had guessed he'd need superconducting wire and he'd waited until some could be smuggled in from the States. The Movement wasn't supposed to have any, of course—it was still classified hardware—but they had friends everywhere and it wasn't hard to get anything they really needed.

A little spool of the same wire could be used to nullify the effects of several hundred thousand dollars worth of equipment. It was always like that—a base commander this far out would think he was dealing with guerrillas from the local peasants, so he wouldn't take precautions.

Now that the sensor network was bypassed the heavy cable that gave the fence mechanical strength could be cut without worry. He tried to avoid shaking the fence, but they were tough and thick and he had taken too long already.

He cut the last line and threw it behind him into the mud. Now there was a hole in the fence, three feet on a side.

He rolled over to Jake.

"In this light you can't spot it from more than a few yards away," he whispered. "When we come back out remember it's just to the left of this supporting post."

Jake nodded slightly, intently studying the surrounding night. "My move next, then."

They hit him once and when he started to get up they hit him again, hard, slamming him against a tree and cuffing him across the face so his head snapped back and forth rhythmically as each one of the thin-faced men stepped up for his turn. "These people okay down here without you, you don't understand what

it's like . . ." They burned the car and he had to walk back the five miles to town, helping along the others who had gotten it worse. "What's behind all you people? Who told you to do this?"

He pushed some of Ragan's equipment further up the slope and scrambled up to the hole. The earth gave off a deep organic smell and exertion made the air seem thicker, but action was better than waiting.

Jake crouched beside the hole, testing the mud for good footing. He slid a heavy glove from under his shirt and took out a thick slab of meat. He fitted the glove over his left hand and wrapped the meat around it, holding the ends together with fingers and thumb. With his right hand he slipped a knife out of its sheath and leaned forward, blocking the empty square in the fence with his left arm. Sweat had collected under his arms and he thought he could hear his own pulse in the stillness.

Maybe it was only a precaution. Maybe they hadn't been detected and all this was a waste of time.

But he had only a moment to wait and then there was the scrabbling of soft nails on soft earth and a black form slipped out of the shadows near the fence. He lost sight of it for an instant and suddenly something struck his outstretched hand a powerful blow.

Everything had depended on the dog being well trained, not just hastily taught to seek and kill. If it had made a noise, let out a small bark when it picked up his scent, someone else would hear and find him. The government needed a lot of dogs now, and a lot of guards. The Movement had seen to that.

They had switched from the usual watchdog, who warns but will not attack.

Alerted, intruders would fade back into the jungle here before guards arrived, and the scent could be lost in any of the swamps of the area. And more often than not they ambushed the guards just outside the base and escaped anyway.

So it was just good tactics to try to pin down an intruder near the base, with the dogs if necessary, and deal with him there. Jake had to count on the dogs being killers, and good ones.

The bite had taken him just above the edge of the glove, smashing his arm back against his chest and toppling him over. The dog, diverted at the last instant by the smell of the fresh meat, had hit slightly off target.

As Jake rolled onto his back he breathed in the musty odor of damp fur and almost choked. He brought the knife up quickly, smoothly, and it caught. He could tell by the feel that it was in the throat.

He pivoted to one side, using the momentum of the dog's rush to rip the knife across its throat and then throw the body on down the incline.

There was a soft thud as it hit the ground, rolled and lay still. Ragan gave it a kick and nodded up at him. He breathed out slowly, letting the silence settle once more. It was a German Shepherd, about a hundred pounds of muscle, teeth and black hair, and all of it quite dead. They smiled at each other.

It would have worked on most people. Even trained fighting men don't like the idea of wrestling with a large dog in the dark, without being able to see the teeth or gauge the point of impact when it springs. Any man is a match for a dog in good light, but the first few seconds of the attack can kill before you realize what you're dealing with.

They collected their gear. If there were

other dogs they would probably be far enough away to give the men time to penetrate beyond the fence. There would be at least one guard nearby, but he wouldn't be able to see the dog's body.

Ragan gestured at his watch, stepped through the hole and padded quietly toward the lights ahead, Jake following.

Now the factor of the dogs was on their side. With animals like that roving the base, guards wouldn't stay alert very long, and no people would be out for a casual stroll on the edge of the compound. Jake had to remind himself that for the people inside this was still just an ordinary night in the tropics, and there was no reason for them to be on the alert.

"I think, Mr. Ragan, it would be a good idea for you to apply somewhere else for graduate work."

"Why? I like the department here, and my record is good. There's no better place to study political science in the country."

The older man hesitated. "It's true you've done good course work. But the other members of the department feel your attitude isn't scholarly—the amount of time you spend on outside, ah, interests could be overlooked when you were an undergraduate, but . . ."

They moved swiftly, angling for the nearest of the buildings.

In the distance the snapping sound of rifle fire broke out, followed by a short angry burst from a machine gun. Malley was coming in ahead of time, off schedule. They ran faster. The rifle spoke again. The pneumatic *chung* of a trip flare came a second later from behind them and off to the left.

At the same instant Ragan turned. Jake was scrambling to his feet.

"Freeze!" he said.

"What . . ." Orange light burst on the muddy plain. Ragan turned casually and pointed in the direction of the rifle fire, looking back over his shoulder at Jake as though giving an order. Someone shouted behind them, back toward the fence.

Ragan looked in the direction of the shout and made the sign to take cover, then dropped himself. Jake followed.

"This was the first flare to go off," Ragan said, twisting around to look back at the fence. "They were alerted by the rifle fire, so they didn't expect the first one here."

He gestured and Jake made out the figure of a soldier lying a hundred yards away. "If they think fast enough they'll search this area, but probably the noise and confusion will distract them." He gave a short laugh. "They probably think I'm a Sergeant."

As if in reply other flares went off down the fence, and spotlights mounted on the tops of buildings snapped on and focused outward. Random shots broke out, the result of surprise and over-imagination from the guards.

"Malley's putting on a big show down there," Jake said. The tempo of firing rose at the other end of the base.

"We've got to move," Ragan said. The flare was sputtering down, lengthening the shadows on the field. "We should be okay. If anybody thought we weren't we'd be drawing fire by now."

They rose quickly and ran for the nearest building, bent over at the waist, half expecting a warning shout behind them. No shout came; they ducked into a shadowed doorway and watched the field for anyone approaching.

"Mac boy! Here old fella! Mac!" someone called out.

Jake laughed softly. "Old Mac isn't operating a watchdog business any

more."

There was a small paved road beyond the concrete building, and a squad of troops was double-timing down it in the direction of Malley's attack. The two men waited for them to pass.

Ragan sucked in the cool dank air of the tropical night and looked over at the black man as sweat glistened on his face. He could count on Jake. He was slightly thinner than was usual for a man his size; the look of hunger clung to him. He'd come in through civil rights, like most of them, and went over to the Movement immediately when the Days of Liberation started.

They began slowly, gathering momentum with each blow that fell on America. Martin Luther King fell, and then Kennedy, and in the months that followed the slow filtration processes of a creaking, aged political system pulled and tugged at the old alignments. New ones began to form, but there was no time.

The solution in Viet Nam was the best possible one, considering the circumstances. But it gave ammunition to the Right and fed the growing bitterness on the Left.

University strikes increased. The slums festered; police went there only in pairs, then in squads. Black Power forgot about butter and concentrated on guns. It became a faith with a growing number of converts. In a year of desperation they had a program, they could organize when everyone else was running for cover. The list of names was long: Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver.

Summer came. Heat and disgust roiled through the streets and spoke of action. The mood was ready. It hung in the air,

everywhere, and one night it crystallized about the crack of a rifle.

Confusion. Panic. Take a telephone system, cut it in a few vital places, and you have a mass of useless wire. It can be repaired in a few hours. But then cut it again.

Hit the water reservoirs. It's easy.

Use those beautiful freeways. Steal a car and go out to the suburbs. The police are all in the center of the city, where they think you'll strike next.

It was a curious coincidence of forces and ideas, just the right touch of isolation, long hours of boredom, dirt and noise.

Underneath, for months before, there was: "Hell with it. We pass all the damn laws they want and now they're getting mixed up with this left wing radical business and who knows what next. Naw, I sure haven't got jobs for one of them."

In a week the riots had gone beyond control in five major cities, partly reaction and part an accident of timing. Efforts to stop it created more problems than they solved as Uncle Toms used the opportunity to move up, to assume a leadership that didn't exist any longer. And as often as not, were cut down in the attempt.

There was: "We're sure we could solve this problem, too. After all, we did in the past. But now, if we had more time . . ." All this spoken by men who should've been a degree more aggressive, or kinder, or wiser. But weren't.

So more buildings burned and the Guard moved in against resistance that, this time, didn't slacken and die. The generals learned that to really police an area meant matching the community man for man. In the cities there were thousands, then almost millions, to match.

Numbers demand organization, so the Movement—the same word as Martin Luther King's, but with a different meaning now, a meaning that made a man stand up, the heart pump, breathing quicken—the Movement grew.

And finally:

"I'm afraid we can't wait any longer, gentlemen. Holding down this many troops just to keep the lid on endangers the national security elsewhere. You evidently can't control your own people. Who is it that's behind this? The President feels there is a conscious design here . . ."

For once—the first time—they were right.

Jake's training was good. According to the records Ragan saw before he left the States for this mission, Jake had shown an instinctive ability to make effective plans and lead men in the chaos that followed, and he moved quickly up into the national organization that was forming then, most of it underground. Within weeks he was traveling from one city to another to help plan operations, coordinating the militant and trying to keep the fiction of the "spontaneous revolution" going for a while longer.

When the lid blew off Jake didn't have to think about which way to go. Neither did Ragan. Be an Uncle Tom and play games with the power structure, or be a man. But even then, keep clean.

Jake didn't. The FBI pinned some of the assassinations on him and he barely got across the Mexican border in time. Now he was stuck in Brazil, lying low most of the time, organizing the peasants and waiting. Waiting for operations like this.

The large arc lights stabbed out a white ring around the center of the compound,

and a siren wailed briefly.

Malley was probably sweating it out now, Ragan decided, trying to judge how long it would be before things got too hot. His men wouldn't back out until he gave the order, but rifles were no competition against what the Army had. They were only dirt farmers, some recruited from the Marxist parties that flourished in the rural regions, and they didn't have the internal discipline that only experience can give.

Someone ran by the corner near them, feet crunching on gravel.

"Better get the stuff ready," Jake said. The big Negro reached around to his pack and broke the seal with one hand. Timing and ignition switches were exposed, but the charge itself couldn't be reached without tearing away the canvas knapsack. Ragan did the same.

"If they keep coming down this street we're going to have to move anyway," Ragan said.

"I'll check," Jake replied, and before Ragan could stop him he was sliding along the wall to the corner that met the street. He looked quickly around and called back, "Clear."

Ragan followed him across the street, pack bouncing slightly on his back where it had been freed. The area smelled of new concrete; some of the base was still being built.

They slowed to a trot in the shadow of a building, glanced around and went on to the next.

"The residential section starts in the next block, beyond this," Jake whispered. They stopped, looking at the next street. "Most of the streets are still dirt—only the work areas have been paved yet."

Ragan nodded, leaning against the rough wall. The map he had studied was remarkably accurate, so far.

"The transmission tower is just beyond these houses, then," he said. "There aren't any more targets of opportunity now, we're too far behind schedule. It's the tower or nothing."

The growl of an engine had been growing louder, and now headlights abruptly rounded a corner and a jeep whined down the street. Two soldiers with carbines rode in back, watching both sides of the road.

The two men hit the dirt next to the wall, heads down. Ragan took advantage of the time to see if there was any other course he could follow.

The only reason the plan could work was that every part of the base was equally vulnerable. If the computers were destroyed, months could be consumed replacing them. Or the tracking antennas. Or power facilities. The loss of anything, this far off the normal shipping lanes, would hurt. If men were killed it would be hard to find the technicians and scientists to take their places—especially after the word got around that it was a dangerous job.

A shot to the moon or Mars demands that stations be set up around the world, capable of handling sophisticated transmissions and carrying out rescues, if necessary. Satellite communication networks like the Syncom system just couldn't handle the heavy signal flux. If only a few of the stations were put out of action, there wouldn't be any shot.

The jeep came down the block, grinding along in low gear.

Ragan grinned in the darkness. If he had anything to do with it, the Brazilian base would be out of the money for months. And if there were no shots, after a while the Congress might get tired of this waste and cut the NASA budget. Put it into helping people instead of pushing

men back and forth to a dried-up ball of rock hundreds of thousands of miles away.

But even better, failure would turn one bureaucracy on another. If enough of them went for each others' throats, maybe the people would have a chance again.

He lifted his head, watching the troopers go by, eyes unseeing.

That's why *he* was in the Movement. The Negro problem was a symptom, not the disease. American democracy was a sham—rights were second to privileges, people less important than advertisements. The only way to stop it was by hitting the leaders themselves, disarming or making impotent the only thing they understood—the top-heavy structures that fed on the people. Assassinate the small administrators, or a big one if you could reach him. Destroy bases. Disrupt communications. Someday, the country would be given back to the people who lived in it.

Jake nudged him. "Okay."

The jeep rounded the curve of the street and they sprinted across behind it, bent into a crouch. They dodged among the shadows, making their way through the low cinder-block homes. A few dejected-looking flowers occasionally witnessed to an attempt at landscaping. Jake stopped at the next corner.

"Tower one more block," he gestured at the red aircraft warning lights blinking overhead. Ragan studied what he could see of the structure ahead, then glanced down the street of copper-colored dirt.

"When the shooting starts the civilians pull their holes in after them," he said. All windows were shaded, and as they watched two porch lights winked out.

They set out at an even pace, keeping close to the shadows near the houses and watching the corner toward the

transmission tower. Jake leading, they circled partway around the last home in the block and stopped near a patio wall, shielded from view of the occupants.

Parabolic antennas dominated a complex configuration on top of what looked like a truncated radio tower. The control booths halfway up were dark, so the big dish wasn't tracking. The adjacent concrete buildings had few offices lit.

"Hey!" Jake pointed to the right. A soldier rounded the corner and slowly walked down the street, rifle at the ready. There was no one else in sight.

"That's not very smart," Ragan whispered.

Jake leaned closer, panting slightly from the run. "They probably plan on stopping us at the edge of the base, before we get into the buildings. If our head count is right they haven't got the men to do that and patrol the streets too."

"But if anybody does get through the perimeter, one man alone won't stop them."

Ragan rolled onto his stomach and unbuttoned the holster at his side. He took the pistol out, removed a stubby tube from his belt and started screwing it onto the barrel. There were a number of small holes drilled into the surface of the tube.

"You're going to try a shot from here?" Jake whispered. Ragan nodded.

"That a silencer?"

"Yeah. Homemade. It'll hold for about three shots, but after that you've got to repack the steel wool inside. They have to be packed just so or there'll be enough back pressure to jam the action of the gun."

"I guess you can make anything if you have to. Even . . ."

"Quiet." Ragan checked the action of

the pistol and moved forward. Bracing one arm against the wall and holding the pistol with both hands, he aimed at the sentry. The man walked slowly near a street lamp, looking from side to side.

His image seemed to float in front of the sights and Ragan squinted with concentration. His finger began to tighten on the trigger.

"No," he said, and looked up. "It's too far for a pistol shot."

Jake glanced at him, then back at the man. "I'd say chances are about even you can get him on the first try."

"But if I miss he might get off a shot and then half the base will be here."

In the stillness the rattling of smallarms fire from Malley's group was like a long, ragged drum roll.

"Look," Jake said. "When he gets to the end of the block he'll probably turn, make a complete circuit around the tower." He gestured at a small building on the corner. "That'll block his view. He won't see this part of the street for about twenty seconds, if we're lucky."

Ragan wiped his brow, trying to think. "Okay," he said.

The soldier was almost at the end of the block. He looked back once, turned the corner and Ragan was running swiftly across the street, holding the pistol at an angle in front of him. With a bound he cleared the sidewalk and flitted among the shadows underneath the tower.

He stopped suddenly and went into the kneeling position for the shot, waiting. Now his breathing was slow and regular.

The soldier appeared from behind the building. He tried to keep away from the light as much as possible and his eyes, partially shadowed by the helmet, flicked nervously back and forth. He was a middle-sized man in his late twenties, with a slow shuffling walk.

This isn't a war, it's slaughter, and anyone who goes along with the bureaucrats, the militarists, is an enemy of his own people. It's up to us, now, to preserve what is left of the American conscience.

There was a sound like a discreet cough and the soldier spun lightly, lazily around and fell solidly on the sidewalk. His rifle gave a sharp clatter as it hit. Ragan sprinted over to the body and lifted it partially off the cement by the arms. He dragged it quickly back into the shadows and dumped it without checking to see if the guard was still alive. Going back for the rifle, he noticed a scarlet smear of blood on the concrete.

He dropped the rifle near the body and looked around. No one yelled, no alarm sounded. Jake trotted up through the dark splotches cast by the tower and stopped beside him.

"He probably had a sight check with the sentry on the next beat every circuit. Not much time."

Ragan glanced impatiently down at his watch. "Malley's got to get out now. Any more time and they'll outflank him for sure."

They raced for the other end of the tower base, away from the guard's body. Jake swung the pack off his back, still running, and made for the furthest tower leg, his boots spitting the gravel aside as he ran.

Ragan stopped abruptly at the first major leg, almost losing his balance. He flipped the last lock off the arming switches.

Two large girders met at the base of the leg and the charge fitted neatly into the joint. The knapsack provided some tamping, but there was enough explosive to do the job unassisted.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 140)

Herein a moment in the life of Moderan, where the people have learned how not to live with themselves . . .

A GLANCE AT THE PAST

DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrated by DAN ADKINS

BECAUSE THEY had much leisure time in automatic New Processes Country, and also because the Rollgos, those fast expensive conveyor roads of the kingdom, would certainly have been inadequate for such a pilgrimage, the people came walking. Under the red-brown vapor shield of hot July they swept across the yards and fields, bunched, like locusts going toward wheat in the old days. Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tap they came on their metaled feet, many all together, until the sound of metal striking plastic was a steady and ominous roar.

Word had spread fast that morning in mid-July. In less than two hours everyone knew of the curious thing's arrival and shortly thereafter almost everyone was in headlong movement toward it. At the request of the Green Council, airmen from Olderan had flown it in during the very early hours of morning, down a transglobal air corridor under cover of darkness, to the very gates of the Building of Ancient Customs. They had moved it carefully in its cushioned case, from the controlled climate of the ship from Olderan. And they established it, in its specially prepared glass display ball, on a black plastic dais in the Building of Ancient Customs. Then solemnly the

Green Council pushed the buttons that advertised the display on all the picture walls in the land, and they declared a week in the queer thing's honor.

Across the yards and fields the hordes of the curious swept on, in their peculiar iron-on-plastic roar, toward the doors of the Building of Ancient Customs. And Conversations were heard among the mighty metaled folk of New Processes Country. One sturdy lady of 'replacements' that were mostly of the fairly old alloy known as iron-x was heard to remark to a younger thing of the new gold-seal alloys that according to the stories handed down and handed down her great-great-great-grandfather's father had been possessed of a little monster gadget much like this they were going to see, and had made constant good use of it too.

"As recently as that! Imagine!" she honked and squawked out of her iron throat that had been worked in iron-x against cancer long ago. She exhibited that universal good feeling common to women everywhere when they are able to impart some fairly scandalous bit of information to another woman.

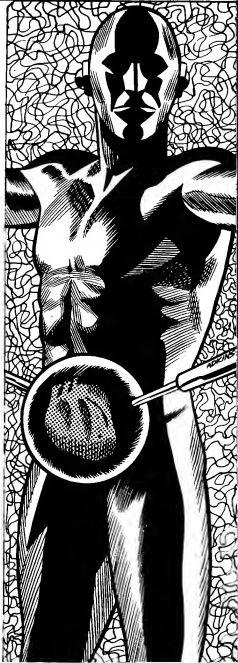
"As far back as we've cared to search," the other replied, all in haughty good fellowship, "we're clean as a flame on that score. But of course I want to see this

thing anyway. You know some of my ancestors, 'way 'way back, in the space age probably, must have had these things, must have depended on them. *How awful!*"

"Well, they say my ancestor got awfully good service out of his, took it wherever he wanted to go, employed it all the time," iron-x lady remarked in a gesture at ancient family loyalty. "But I guess he would have had it 'replaced' as everyone else was doing then, except he was out of the country so much of the time, on space service, to the Million Saucer Battles on Mars, and that awful purple thing on Venus, you know, where they stopped our boys with sheets of purple dust. Just never had time for the change-over, it seemed. And 'tis said he was heard to remark once that because of the things he'd seen, at battles and places, I guess—probably that awful purple thing on Venus, especially—he didn't want to live forever anyway. Can you imagine anyone saying a thing like that?"

The other one couldn't imagine it and said so with appropriate honking and ticking and clucking from her gold-seal larynx.

"But of course that was before people had things like we do here in New Processes Country," the iron-x one kept on, bent still on explaining things for her ancestor. "Imagine not having beautiful and sanitary plastic yards with color-change and a live-alone house-ball for each person to dwell in. Think if you can back to a time before the time of universal daisies, when it wasn't possible to bloom a whole metal garden through the yard holes just at the flick of a button. My ancestor probably never even saw one of the beautiful mechanical flowers, such as we take for granted today. And he didn't have the tin mandolin men nor even one



of the great plastic trios that I can have in my music grotto tonight just at the whim of a beam. The air he breathed was not conditioned unless he was in a room, and then, nine times out of ten, it wasn't flavored. He didn't know the glories of the shape men with their nightly panoramas, nor the color throwers we find so diversionary. He didn't have the different colored vapor shield each month that makes such a pretty world for us. For him it was always blue sky and that awful yellow sun, unless he had clouds, and then gray. *Ugh!* He didn't even have a sex machine! Just think how much we have that he didn't have, and maybe you'll understand."

"Oh, yes," the other agreed, wishing to mollify her companion, "and at the time your ancestor lived no one thought much about living forever anyway. Probably. 'Replacements' were just then getting well started, I imagine. Why, I'll bet at that time no one in the whole world could have claimed for more than fifty percent 'replacement.' And if he did, it would probably just have been some rebuilt battle victim, or a haphazardly put back together auto-wreck case. And not scientific. But look at you and me. You're about up to ninety, aren't you? And scientific!"

"Ninety-one," her companion amended. "And with these new quick-seal alloys that fuse with the flesh so easily I may be able to go higher. But even now, with only nine percent of me flesh-strip and human blood, I don't figure there's much chance I'll die."

"I should hope not," the other agreed. "Of course I'm ninety-two and one-half myself, and I'm starting new treatments tomorrow!"

Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tump they walked on without talking more, toward the Building of Ancient

Customs, part of a horde that swept on all day until very late in the afternoon the vanguard came to the outer gates of the building. Officers from the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs allowed them to go in single file through an entrance gate that was hung heavily with ersatz moss and tin ivy. They passed on into a room where a small round shell of clearest glass rested on an ancient black velvet cover. And each of the curious folk of New Processes Country was allowed to stare a few seconds at the glass ball and its queer occupant that, in a carefully controlled climate, was alive and slaving diligently away at a task that was unreal now, real to it maybe over a hundred years ago. Next week or so the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs would write the letter of thanks and appreciation for the loan of the old-fashioned display. And a generous check would be enclosed for Olderan, that little mountain-and-sea-locked country whose devout queer people clung to ways of flesh and the past.

As they stood side by side watching the quaint outmoded little battler staunchly pound away for their amusement, the iron-x lady was heard to read from a pamphlet describing the unique display: "Today, after viewing this monstrosity, you and I must feel great pity for all our ancient ancestors. It was their poor fortune to be born so long ago and inhabit a world where such a thing as this was everyone's common danger, not the clowning mutant exception, but the common sober rule. No wonder they were wavery and unsure, mushy and vulnerable, scared half to death most of the time and prone to be soft-headed. Let us forgive them, the weak-hearted. Think of the lurking terrors, the anxieties, the insecurities, the *deaths!* they had to endure—when the little monster decided

AS BETWEEN GENERATIONS

The former editor of this magazine offers a pungent fable for the ritualistic solution of at least one aspect of the Generation Gap . . .

BARRY N. MALZBERG

I RUN MY FATHER. For months, years, I have wanted to do this; now I cannot stand it any longer and I push him through the streets of the town, waving the whip, screaming at him. His senile legs patter, his ancient mouth drools, he is pulling the cart to the best of his effort, he moans, could I please not hit him so often and so hard. But I am remorseless; I cannot bear any longer the culmination of all the things that he has done to me and now at last I am seeking retribution. It is not very nice of me but it is the custom.

People line the streets as I run him. It is not an unusual event. On a fine Sunday such as this, maybe ten or twenty sons or daughters will run their fathers, through the clear dry light of morning and into the dank afternoon but for the moment I am the only one; the others, perhaps, waiting until I have finished as a gesture of respect. After all, I have been so patient for so long. I deserve full attention, without competing interests.

The route is one mile long, down the main street and although I am not performing the major exertions, I am puffing when we are barely halfway through, probably with emotion and short-breathed as well because of the things I have been screaming at him.

"Come on you son of a bitch," I bellow as we pass Third Street, "take that and that and that," and slash him deeply, watching the blood run in aged streaks down the dull surfaces of his back. He is 78 years old. "That's for the time you wouldn't let me go with you to park the car!" I say, slashing him, "the time you said that I should stay with mother in the restaurant because it was man's work. And that's for the time when you cut my allowance, you cocksucker, cut me down to 75¢ because you said you didn't like my associations. My associations, damn you!" I shriek and bring the whip down fully, "when you have not known for thirty years the quality of my inner life, the quality of my dreams, the very rubric of my existence. You dared to say that to me!" He pants and increases his pace.

The crowd cheers thinly as we stumble by and once again I bring down the whip, urging him to greater and greater speed. "Remember when I was necking with Doris in our living room and you came in in your pajamas, you old son of a bitch, and told me to grow up! Remember that! I never forgot that, you evil old man," I say, clouting him once again, "and for all the times when you did it to mother when she was tired and sick and distracted, for

all the times you laid your hands on her and carried her away I give you this," and slash him the hardest one yet, a streak of pain that makes the blood dance and I hear his high whining moan. Oh it is wonderful, wonderful, the music of his blood, the singing of his cries, the harmony of his pain, the fullness of my release and it all seems to blend together: sun, street, clouds, cart, whip, memory, loss and retribution as we go winding through the path of the city toward the climactic events that surely lie ahead.

II

I AM DRIVING my son. I have waited for this for thirty-six years, now at last my time has come, the loathsome spawn. He screams in agony in the cart behind me, moaning and sobbing as the whip joggles in his hand, his humiliation visible to all of those who have come to see us. Many fathers have driven their sons in this town: now it is my turn. It has been too long, too long. I can barely control shouting my release to the sun.

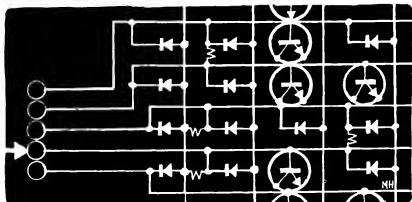
It was raining a little while ago but now it is clear. Everyone can see us; his torment, his guilt, his horror, his effort—and it is time, time that all of this happened because I could not have borne it any longer. He cries in rage behind me as the whip once again harmlessly grazes my flesh. "That's for you, you whelp," I murmur, "that's for the time when you called me an old fart right in front of your mother because I wouldn't let you go out in the rain. Because I wouldn't let you go to your disgusting movies."

Behind me, the cart sways and I know he is near unbalancing. "Good, good," I shriek back at him, "take it, choke on it! That's for the time you borrowed fifty dollars from me at college and said you only needed it for a week and then squandered the whole thing on pinballs and asked for more and never said thank you. That's for the time you broke in on your mother and me when you were seven years old, broke in on us at four in the morning and my lead full and heavy within me and you came in to say you couldn't sleep. Take it, take it you bastard!" and fling these words back to him, back to his teeth, knowing that behind me he has been impaled upon the sword of his humiliation, the very bleakness of his history consuming him as he moans, crouches, tries to drive himself beyond guilt and mumbles in the clutches of his vulnerability. On I deserve it, I deserve it. It is high time.

Alongside, the crowd cheers. They wave at me, tip their hats, smile, teeth glinting in the sun. They share with me the power of the destruction I have brought upon him and I smile back at them, lift a hand, tilt an eyebrow, urge my legs to greater haste so that behind me the graceless sway of the cart, quickening, will toss him to the bloodless stones themselves and tear him, ungracious heart to spent limb and leave him empty, rolling, a darkening husk upon the pavement, waiting, waiting then in the night for the dogs of the prairies to come in from the South and scenting his imminent bones, tear out the very core of him.

—Barry N. Malzberg

ON SALE in SCIENCE FANTASY, Fall-No. 2 (July 23rd)
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♦♦ a critical column by **ALEXEI PANSHIN**

UNBINDING SCIENCE FICTION

All of science fiction's weaknesses—melodrama, triviality, timidity, narrowness of vision, confusion of identity, and bad writing—are the result of the fact that science fiction is a prince reborn as a toad in 1926. Science fiction has been blinking its moist amber eyes and hopping like a toad ever since. In its heart, science fiction has yearned to be a prince, but it has never dared to stand up and try to be one.

It is no accident that a fictional genre using the unknowns of time and space as its material should have appeared in 1926. By then, our knowledge of history and geography—local time and space—left no room for credible unknowns on Earth. Or, if you prefer, left no room for unknowns worthy of being believed in. To find them again, as is artistically and psychologically necessary, means the abandonment of the confines of terrestrial geography and history. In this century, some literature using the removed and indefinite settings of "tomorrow" and "out there" as its

consistent locale was an inevitability. The only questions were in what form it would appear and what it would be called, and as we all know, it appeared in the form of a toad and was called science fiction.

At the turn of the century, 'creative fantasies were to be found at every level of literature, from, shall we say, William R. Bradshaw's *The Goddess of Atvatabar* to H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*, without any seeming consciousness of a separate nature encompassing them all. If creative fantasy had been represented at its best, not by Wells, who had his own purposes, but by an active theoretician attempting to establish a separate literary genre, as recreative fantasy had its William Morris, then the possibilities of creative fantasy might have been recognized at the first moment.

Instead, creative fantasy in most countries has continued to the present day as a minor tradition in major letters. This tradition has served "science fiction" by furnishing it with clean, well-scrubbed and respectable examples to present to the world.

Recently with the help of a committee of Blish, de Camp, Knight, Norton, Russ, Silverberg and Williamson, I compiled a basic bibliography of science fiction for one of the library journals on behalf of the Science Fiction Writers of America. If the bibliography is a report of science fiction, the pulp magazine literature, it is transparent hokum. The list includes books from England and Europe like Capek's *War With the Newts* and Graves' *Watch the Northwind Rise*, like *Brave New World*, *Perelandra*, *Lord of the Rings* and *We*, none of which were conceived as science fiction. On the other hand, these books are clearly entitled to a place on a bibliography of modern creative fantasy, which is what I think we actually compiled. In that case, however, some of the science fiction titles on the bibliography became more difficult to justify.

Creative fantasy has appeared more overtly and self-consciously in America than anywhere else in the world, but in the narrow and crude form of science fiction, a pulp literature. As a result, writers of ambition seem to have been deterred from writing any creative fantasy containing machines until the recent expansions in science fiction's notions of itself and the first experiments by Burroughs and Barth. We have almost nothing like Graves or Huxley. In the SFWA bibliography, the only American creative fantasies brought in to grace science fiction's case were George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* and Gore Vidal's *Messiah*, plus, of course, Bradbury and Vonnegut. While I know that Bradbury was a boy science fiction fan and continues to have ties to the field, it remains that there isn't a living definition of "science fiction" that can comfortably contain him. As for Vonnegut, he has

found the science fiction label attached to *Player Piano* (Bantam pb in 1955 as *Utopia 14*) and *The Sirens of Titan* enough of a handicap that he has written somewhat hopefully in the *New York Times Book Review* that so-called "science fiction writers" are nothing more than "plain, old short-story writers and novelists who mention the fruits of engineering and research," and "if they didn't enjoy having a gang of their own so much, there would be no such category as science-fiction." If science fiction went away, I'm sure he wouldn't mind.

Since creative fantasy can be cast as melodrama, the pulps could and did serve as a home for the genre. What was not certain was that the result should be "science fiction"—technological melodrama. It is not beyond imagination to see instead of Gernsback issuing *Amazing* in 1926, Edgar Rice Burroughs issuing a *John Carter of Mars Magazine*. If that had been the case, no doubt our present idea of the nature of the field would try to accommodate ERB instead of *Ralph 124C 41+*.

Even so, Gernsback had an audience for his "science fiction". Not only was technology fiction from Frank Reade to Tom Swift a staple popular item in the early part of the century—*The Motor Pirate* by G. Sidney Paternoster might stand as the equivalent of today's Martin Caidin or Hank Searles novel—but there was precedent set as long before as Jules Verne for a mating of technology fiction and creative fantasy. Gernsback followed Verne, aiming for Verne's audience. The result has been a peculiarly constricted creative fantasy that even today still feels that it ought to have some relationship to science. Science is a possible subject for creative fantasy, but it is only one among many. The shibboleth of scientific

justification has been repeatedly tested since 1926, not only by stories based on such scientifically dubious premises as time travel, but by the existence of writers like Bradbury and Vonnegut to whom science has been of no importance. We have reached the point where we are willing to talk of "speculative fiction" instead of "science fiction", but even today we waste our time trying to reconcile creative fantasy and science.

There are other reasons for writing creative fantasy than the portrayal of technological or social change. In introducing his collected "fantastic stories" in 1934—he didn't call them "science fiction novels"—H. G. Wells wrote, "These tales have been compared with the work of Jules Verne and there was a disposition on the part of literary journalists at one time to call me the English Jules Verne. As a matter of fact there is no literary resemblance whatever between the anticipatory inventions of the great Frenchman and these fantasies. His work dealt almost always with actual possibilities of invention and discovery, and he made some remarkable forecasts. The interest he invoked was a practical one; he wrote and believed and told that this or that thing could be done, which was not at that time done. He helped his reader to imagine it done and to realise what fun, excitement or mischief would ensue. Many of his inventions have 'come true.' But these stories of mine collected here do not pretend to deal with possible things; they are exercises of the imagination in a quite different field. They belong to a class of writing which includes the *Golden Ass of Apuleius*, the *True Histories of Lucian*, *Peter Schlemihl* and the story of *Frankenstein*. It includes too some admirable inventions by Mr. David Garnett, *Lady into Fox* for

instance. They are all fantasies; they do not aim to project a serious possibility; they aim indeed only at the same amount of conviction as one gets in a good gripping dream. They have to hold the reader to the end by art and illusion and not by proof and argument, and the moment he closes the cover and reflects he wakes up to their impossibility."

The difference between art-and-illusion and proof-and-argument does not separate Wells and Verne. Verne did use art and illusion. He was not up to Wells as a creative fantasist, but he was one. His books survive today only to the extent that they are creative fantasy. Neither is it the difference between fantasy and science fiction. Science fiction is nothing but fantasy—it is all art and illusion. Science fiction and all creative fantasy live by inner consistency, not by accuracy to any fact. The difference between art-and-illusion and proof-and-argument is the difference between art and science, and a writer of creative fantasy ought to remember which to respect.

The books that Wells names as his models are hardly scientific in intent, but they are the same creative fantasies that historians like de Camp and Moskowitz cite as science fiction's ancestry. If there is a true relationship, and I think there is, then science fiction has been narrower than its ancestors.

Over the last forty-five years, science fiction has consistently expanded its notions of itself, working toward self-recognition as creative fantasy. Isaac Asimov claims that since 1926 science fiction has passed through three stages, dominated in turn by adventure, science and sociology, and has now entered a fourth in which style is dominant. This is not to say the same thing that I have said, but it is an indication of expansion in

horizons.

I think it is safe to say that this expansion will be sufficiently great that the day will come when Philip K. Dick's examinations of the nature of reality, presently considered wayward science fiction, will seem, except for their primacy, tame, conservative and commonplace. The nature of reality is a central question for creative fantasy and Dick has hardly exhausted it.

A new and naive literature may best be tempered by beginning at the bottom of the crudest current tradition and working its way up. It may be the best past for any prince to serve time as a toad. I'm not sure I believe myself, but it may all prove to have been worthwhile. We may find in retrospect that forty years as a pulp magazine literature has provided creative fantasy with a necessary vocabulary.

In the meantime, science fiction has shared the vices of toads. Like other pulp literatures, science fiction has featured the short story, made melodrama a principle, and clothed itself in crude prose. In fact, science fiction may have been the crudest of all the pulps since its authors were amateurs writing in imitation of pulp rose.

In the early fifties an epidemic killed all the true toads. Science fiction was left squatting by itself in its best attempt at a toady pose. When other pulp lines were dying and science fiction continued to sell, there was a flood of new sf magazines, something like forty in 1953. That, of course, was too many, and most died. But science fiction magazines have continued to be published until the present day. And those that have survived were not the most toadlike.

The unique survival of science fiction has been taken seriously by some, including me. It has led us to the

conclusion that science fiction is more than the simple toad it has always been presumed to be. But how wide the vision? As wide as the unsurveyable limits of creative fantasy? Not necessarily. Only honest ambition and a vision of science fiction as a Supertoad can account for books like *The Men in the Jungle* and *Damnation Alley*, *Ring of Ritornel* and *Lord of Light*. They are an attempt to do pulp better than it was ever done in 1935, but melodrama remains a principle, now as then: Supertoad.

It is only in these recent days that science fiction has begun to display much awareness of the uses of language. In times past, sf did have its word-boys, Sturgeon and Bradbury, but writing gracefully was just their trick. Neither Sturgeon nor Bradbury ever won a Hugo or a Nebula with the *schtick*.

The ordinary prose of science fiction from 1926 into the present has been innocent and crude. Even so prominent a writer as Frank Herbert regularly shows himself clumsy with his tools. *Dune's* power is a matter of accumulation, not sureness of touch. Even so Grand an Old Man as A. E. van Vogt could only be described as quasi-literate. Even so sturdy a Master as Isaac Asimov wrote his fiction with a heavy hand—a far more stolid prose than he uses today in his nonfiction. Behind Herbert, van Vogt and Asimov have stood rank on rank of less able stylists.

It has been said that science fiction underwent a revolution in writing standards with the advent of *F&SF* and *Galaxy* in 1950. This is largely true. The standard ever since (not consistently observed) has been raised as high as minimal literacy.

The model of science fiction style in 1950 could be Robert Heinlein. Heinlein

is a strong writer, but single-noted. He depended on clarity of expression and the Heinlein Half-Hitch, his characteristic and recognizable turn of phrase. Most of science fiction has followed Heinlein in aspiring to nothing better than clarity plus recognizability, and clarity is not an unworthy goal. I can say, as the man who proofread *The Age of Ruin* by John Faucette, that even today clarity of vision and expression is an unrealized ideal in science fiction.

Writers more ambitious in their use of language than Heinlein did exist in the fifties—Bester, Pangborn, Vance. They used words gracefully and individually, but even so limitedly. Vance has shown by his mystery stories and some very few of his fantasies that his usual diction, ripe, ironic and filled with names like trumpet calls, is a matter of careful, conscious art. The result has been stories like *The Dying Earth* and *The Dragon Masters*. It is a strange tone, and Vance's patented own. But in the end, Vance and Bester and Pangborn have only hit single notes, strange and clear. They have not so much used a scale as shown that one exists by implication.

The most honored novelists of the sixties, Samuel "Rog" Zelazny, were the most patent stylists. Isaac Asimov says that today style is dominant in science fiction, and certainly those new novelists who might be listed after Zelazny and Delany—Disch, LeGuin, Russ, Lafferty, and the reborn Brunner and Silverberg—all pay attention to their language.

But so far even the best of us is only playing fingergames with language. It takes a certain courage to dare effects. For instance, so far as I have read in science fiction, only Roger Zelazny among us has attempted a note that might be

called eloquence, and after four pages he was willing to drop it. We have not yet had a true grandmaster of language, able to assume a new voice at will to suit story and situation; a writer able to match Heinlein's half-hitches and Bester's cherrybombs; able to span the range of Vance and Sturgeon and Pangborn all put together; finding identity in the range of his works, like an explorer who has touched both Poles, rather than finding identity in the repeated sounding of a single discovered note.

A young writer may write stories in other people's voices, as a young Zelazny did exercises in the hands of Harlan Ellison and John Collier and others, but he generally gives up this kind of stretching when he finds a single new variation of his own. The trouble is that a single note sounded too often may come to have the compulsive ring of self-parody. Sturgeon's 1969 short story, "The Man Who Learned Loving," is as clearly self-parody as any of the later novels of Hemingway. Zelazny's *Creatures of Light and Darkness* manages to be both experiment and self-parody.

I see as ideal a science fiction writer able to use language as an easy tool, so much the master of different voices that his first-person characters seem different from himself and each other—not merely described as different, but different in essence. That is a standard that Heinlein and Zelazny, to name two frequent users of first person narrative, have not met.

I don't insist on this standard. It is my own personal jackrabbit and it may be beyond catching by me or anyone. Still, I chase it because it is the only standard I know worthy of the new unknown universe of creative fantasy. If a science fiction writer were to approach creative fantasy as Bob Dylan approached the

topical song, science fiction would be transformed. Dylan has hit so many notes in ten years that it was not surprising that last year he should present not just a new tone and idiom, but a new singing voice as well. Imagine if a Zelazny had been able to follow *Lord of Light* not with another and yet another story of human immortals playing comic book god, but with a surprise. There is no reason why he shouldn't. Dylan has made more out of less.

The insistence on melodramatic plots, motivations and story apparatus is another pulp legacy. Melodrama, as we have proven for forty-five years, is a possible way of casting creative fantasy. It is not the only way, nor necessarily the best way. Melodrama is an impossible mode for close examination of character and setting. It ignores all fine distinctions. It assumes that excitement is the heart of interest and will sacrifice, deny or subvert all other aims for the sake of excitement.

Modern creative fantasy does not have to be melodramatic. There are a few examples from within science fiction—Pangborn's *West of the Sun*, Zelazny's *The Dream Master*, Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. There are a few examples from without—Graves' *Watch the Northwind Rise*, Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Stapledon's *Last and First Men*.

Beyond This Horizon is Robert Heinlein's masterpiece. It was the most frequently named book on the SFWA bibliography. This novel poses exacting questions about personal purpose and the purposes of society—precisely the sort of questions that creative fantasy is best at setting because it is able to deal with them purely. *Beyond This Horizon* deals with its questions in a creditable manner.

It is an amazing and marvelous book to have come from *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1942.

At the same time, it must be clear to anyone who reads it that *Beyond This Horizon* is misshapen. The first two-thirds of the book chase an unsuccessful revolution over a period of a few months; then the revolution folds its tent and goes away and the passage of five more years is crammed into 20,000 words. If Heinlein had not been writing for a pulp magazine and felt the need to stuff in melodrama, he might have paced his story evenly. He had five years of story to tell, but unfortunately this story is about the redefinition of society, not machinations for personal advantage. Heinlein did his best. He took his most exciting machination—a doomed lace handkerchief revolution—inflated it, and surrounded it with as much as he could of what he really wanted to say. When the machination dies, Heinlein appends the rest of his five years almost as an afterthought. It is a measure of the novel's strength that it can survive such treatment. The pulp magazine need for melodrama is nearly its death.

To an extent, science fiction has compromised with melodrama by substituting for it the special sense of delight in the universe and its workings that is sf's saving grace. Even more often, however, science fiction has combined that sense of wonder with the sensational and the cheaply romantic. The bulk of science fiction is filled with fights, chases, abductions, greed, fear, power-lust, and simple characters with talent for engineering-and-adventure and muddy boots. Franz Rottensteiner, a young Austrian critic, says of the population of American science fiction: "But what seems strange to me, and even a little

shocking, is that there are hardly any other characters in SF stories. There are the modern barbarians and little else." There is much that Rottensteiner says that seems wrongheaded, but this is a point I would have to grant him.

Just as too much science fiction continues to be badly written, too much continues to be melodramatic. In part, this may be the result of writers cutting prose to the size, demands and payment of science fiction's chief contemporary market, the paperback, with the possibility of additional magazine money as gravy. Melodrama is easy to write badly and easy to sell. Also in part, melodrama may be a habit. Writers who need paths may see no alternative to *Thongor the Thirty-Second*.

But melodrama and well-marked paths are hobbles. For years, science fiction writers have been testing melodrama without quite abandoning it. Philip Dick has written some queer but wonderful melodramatic examinations of the nature of reality. Zelazny and Delany have tried to mate myth and melodrama. The time has now come to try new things. There is more to creative fantasy than melodrama.

The past few years have seen an increasing number of attempted alternatives to melodrama. The "New Wave", inasmuch as it is anything, is an attempt to find alternatives to the past shape of science fiction. J. G. Ballard may be wrong, his experiments dead ends, but he is right to try to extend the borders of science fiction. Not only Ballard, but Delazny, Dick, Disch, Aldiss and who knows what number of others are clearly trying to extend the borders of science fiction.

The most successful science fiction line of recent years has been the Ace Science Fiction Specials. Ace Specials have

dominated the Nebula novel awards in both of the Specials' first two years: three nominations of seven in 1968, three of six in 1969, and two winning books. The Specials have included alternatives to melodrama as well as melodrama, in fact have welcomed alternatives. Of the six Nebula finalists—*Isle of the Dead*, *The Jagged Orbit*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Past Master*, *Picnic on Paradise* and *Rite of Passage*—only *Isle of the Dead* is pre-eminently a melodrama. Mixed with mythology. Brunner experiments with form, length and serious content; Lafferty with surrealism; Russ with sparseness; LeGuin and I with the intensive development of basically non-melodramatic situations. All of the books do make some compromise with melodrama. *Picnic on Paradise* makes its compromise on its first page, though scarcely again thereafter. *Past Master* is full of sensation, violence and extravagant poses, transformed into a strange individual question about man in the universe. It is melodrama, but not for a consistent melodramatic purpose.

The success of the Specials, and particularly these books, has not gone unnoticed. There are a growing number of publishers aware of serious experiment in sf and ready to encourage it. Though they may not always have Ace's editorial acumen, evident in its string of first novelists, in many cases they do have larger budgets than Ace. At the present moment, experiment pays. You may be sure which way things are trending when one after another of science fiction's most determined melodramatists begin producing long serious experimental creative fantasies. Brunner and Silverberg have revealed new ambition in recent years. I know nothing of Keith Laumer's plans, but if I were a bright

young editor with money to spend. I believe I would talk to him about a major novel.

Money is not the worst of reasons for writing better. It's a very pleasant reason. It is not so very often in this world that an audience and money are clearly waiting for better work.

The final negative legacy of the pulps, along with melodrama and bad writing, is the short story, or rather the artificial restriction in length imposed on science fiction by pulp magazine needs. Joanna Russ has written that the short story is the natural form for science fiction, and Harlan Ellison agrees. I would say, on the other hand, that while the short story is a good deal more respectable than melodrama and bad writing, it has been as confining a limitation.

Since 1926, most science fiction has been short. Not all of it has been bad by any means. There is more good short science fiction than long. There is also far far more bad short science fiction than long. The short story and science fiction have no particular affinity—saturation is all.

Shortness has great disadvantages, particularly for a literature that sells strangeness. The only strangeness that can be packed into a length too short to allow development of character or situation is the strangeness of the bizarre surprise, the platitude, or the precious obscurity, so the short science fiction story is a collection of firecrackers, morality plays and facts like diamonds in melodramatic settings. I have a memory I can't place of a story that hinges on the inability of a match to burn in freefall. I would not be surprised to learn that it was melodramatic, or to learn that it had been reprinted, either.

It is no wonder that the ground now

seems well-turned and most short science fiction stories over-familiar. The form is a straitjacket. The things that can be done with it have been done over and over. *Analog* may pay as much for a 6,000 word story as for a 10,000 word story, but it is still in chronic shortage of short fiction. As often as not, the short fiction that we do remember, like Asimov's Foundation stories, Aldiss's Hothouse series, McCaffrey's Dragonrider stories, or Cordwainer Smith's whole *oeuvre*, gains its power not from intrinsic impact, but from its place in a larger structure. Again, story after story that has seemed impressive or not in magazine, has proven to be an abridgment or condensation or trial effort for a longer work, like Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, Budrys' *Rogue Moon*, Pangborn's *Davy*, or my *Rite of Passage*. In almost any issue of any science fiction magazine, short stories outnumber long overwhelmingly. Yet long stories and serials consistently outpace shorter fiction in *Analog's* *An Lab*. We remember far more of the fifteen novels published in a year by the science fiction magazines than the three hundred short stories.

When the science fiction magazines were the primary market for novels, science fiction novels were few in number and limited in length. I doubt that stories of more than 50,000 words constitute more than 5% of the stories published by the sf magazines since 1926. Of that fraction only a similarly small fraction can be longer than 80,000 words. What this means is that four-part magazine serials have later been republished as halves in Ace Doubles. It means that most science fiction novels make loosely-set 180-page Doubleday books.

What it means is that the science fiction novel is practically an unknown form. The area above 100,000 words is

barely-known territory. We are so pleased to see anyone at all there that we have given awards to books like *Stand on Zanzibar*, an impressive experiment but no viable model, and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, no better than an argument in favor of the books that Ursula LeGuin may yet write. *Dune* and *Stranger in a Strange Land*, each in its own time unprecedentedly long, both exciting, both imperfect, not only won a Nebula and two Hugos but attracted a previously unknown audience. They are only the first. They are not the last and will not be the best. Not by any means. Short science fiction, in its limitation, in its nimety, does have more good examples to show for itself than the novel, but the science fiction novel is as yet an unknown quantity, waiting discovery.

I don't mean to recommend length as an absolute good. How far it properly should be carried is not clear. I do know that there is much serious work to be done at 100,000 words or more. I do know that Chip Delany is writing a novel which he intends to be published in five simultaneous paperbacks. For my part, I am between the third and fourth parts of a novel in seven books. We have not seen the largest, for good or bad, of monster science fiction novels.

Things are changing in science fiction, but melodrama, bad writing and the limitations of short length still hamper creative fantasy from realizing itself.

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to have a *bad* day."

"Yes!" gasped her gold-seal companion.

Then, in a great outpouring of good feeling and good fellowship, and poignantly aware of their common bond of good luck, they decided, right there in the late afternoon, to recite the Morning

Here is Arthur Koestler generalizing on the state of modern physics in his book *The Sleepwalkers*. I submit that what he says applies equally to science fiction today:

"The symptom that a particular branch of science or art is ripe for a change is a feeling of frustration and malaise, not necessarily caused by any acute crisis in that specific branch—which might be doing quite well in its traditional terms of reference—but by a feeling that the whole tradition is somehow out of step, cut off from the mainstream, that the traditional criteria have become meaningless, divorced from living reality, isolated from the integral whole. This is the point where the specialist's *hubris* yields to philosophical soul-searching, to the painful reappraisal of his basic axioms and of the meaning of terms which he had taken for granted; in a word, to the thaw of dogma. This is the situation which provides genius with the opportunity for his creative plunge under the broken surface."

If I am right. If melodrama, bad writing and the short story are unnecessary limitations on science fiction, now being discarded. If science fiction has no necessary connection with science. If science fiction really is a prince with identity problems. What can we expect from creative fantasy? What can we expect worth the anticipation?

—Alexei Panshin


Pledge, the early morning salute, a thing usually reserved for day-start. Together they intoned: "From this day forward, and forever, I truly thank that great iron and plastic idol we have raised in our own image and set to circle our world always on a red and yellow satellite—I thank him truly for my iron and plastic—my everlasting—*heart!*" —David R. Bunch

SPOOK

BY DAVID
WRIGHT O'BRIEN

A Fantastic Classic

I sat down on the coffin
to listen to the sermon



*Being a spook isn't such a cinch
as you might think! There are a lot of
angles. How would you make a phone
call? Or flip a taxi? Or save your
girl from marrying a fortune-hunter?*

for YOURSELF



"YOU'LL hurry back as soon as possible, won't you, Ronnie?" Jo asked me at the airport that morning. They were warming up my little sports monoplane, and I stood in the warm sun with my arm around her, looking down at the wonderful things the sunlight did to that rust colored hair of hers.

"You know it, hon," I answered. "I'll be back with bells and baubles. Even the moon if you want it."

She grinned up at me, and her nose wrinkled in that elfin way. "I don't want that," she laughed. "But you will bring me something, won't you?" She put a slim finger to her pretty chin in mock contemplation. "How about four leaf clovers?" she decided. "Hundreds of them, for luck."

It was my turn to grin.

"Pick out something hard," I challenged.

"That'll be enough," she said. "But don't forget, hundreds of them."

"For luck," I promised. "For the luckiest, most wonderful marriage in the world the moment I get back." I saw the sports plane was ready, so I took her in my arms and said goodbye.

Minutes later, behind the controls of the ship, I looked down and saw a tiny red-headed girl waving a white handkerchief. Then the earth below resolved itself into an orderly cross-quilt of roads and farmland, and I was on my way.

Two hours away from the airport, I was still thinking about Jo and what a wonderful bride she would make on my return. I hadn't been paying much attention to the instrument panel, and so

when the motor started coughing, and the foot pedals grew sticky and hard to manage I was naturally startled.

I didn't have much more time to be startled, for in the next two minutes I found the ship out of control, the motor acting ragged, and the nasty problem of a sudden air pocket throwing me wing-down.

Thirty seconds later and I was fighting a terrific downward spin while the wind screamed through the vents of the cockpit cowl!

The spinning cross patches of earth rushed sickeningly toward me, growing larger and larger. There was no time for sweat or fear as I fought those controls to straighten the ship out of it. You can't bail out in the middle of a spin. Closer—all I could think of now was Jo.

There was a blinding, vast, incredibly engulfing roar—then blackness!

I STOOD there about a hundred yards away from the crumpled, burning mass that was the little sports monoplane, watching the smoke curl upward from the twisted wreckage.

I was scared stiff and my hands were shaking as I fished for a cigarette and lighted it. It was incredibly miraculous that I was unscathed—totally uninjured by the crash. I kept thinking of this and wondering how I'd gotten out of the wreckage, for the first realization I'd had was standing off from the plane watching it burn.

Sirens wailed—I'd crashed in a farm plot near a highway—and minutes later men were running across from the road, piling out of an ambulance, and dashing toward the wreckage.

They paid no attention to me—ran right by, in fact—and began working on the blaze with chemical extinguishers, while some of them worked dangerously in and out of the wreckage

searching for bodies.

It was then, of course, that I snapped out of my dazed stupidity and dashed over to the men with the extinguishers.

"Hey," I yelled. "Let it burn. There's no one in there. I'm the pilot, and I got out unharmed!"

I was less than five yards from one of the ambulance men with the extinguishers. He didn't even turn.

Now I grabbed him by the shoulder, hard.

"Hey," I yelled again. "It's all right. There's no one in there!"

And at that instant, two things hit me with stunning force. First, the chap acted as if he still didn't hear me. And second, from the corner of my eye, I saw three fellows dragging a body from the cockpit. *My body!*

IT IS hard to get accustomed to the fact that you are dead. It is even more difficult to adjust yourself to the inevitable conclusion that you are a ghost.

These mental callisthenics—unpleasant though they were—were what I had to go through as I watched the ambulance people roar off down the highway with my body some fifteen minutes later.

I ran around like a chicken—or a ghost—with my head cut off during the time that they put out the blaze and carted my corpse off from the scene. I yelled. I howled. I protested. But, of course, no one paid the slightest attention to me.

They couldn't see me. They couldn't hear me. Even though I could hear and see myself and them quite clearly. At last I gave it up, and contented myself with glumly seeing the blaze put out and my body taken away.

Then I stood there on the highway, watching the cars flash past—some of them stopped to view the crash scene—

and ruminating on the nasty position I was now in.

Oddly enough, I felt no sorrow for myself. Maybe that was due to the fact that, to myself, I was still myself. If you see what I mean. I still had cigarettes in the pocket of my sport jacket. I had a wallet in the opposite pocket. I could stand up, sit down, move around. Everything was pretty much the same to me—aside from being invisible and inaudible—but not to the world I'd left.

All things considered, my mental adjustment was proceeding at an incredible speed. And now, unhappily, I had room to think of Jo. Her face had been in my mind just before the crash. But now it was there even more strongly. For it had suddenly occurred to me that this would put an end to our plans.

Beautiful young ladies didn't marry ghosts. Or as far as I knew, they didn't.

But oddly enough, there was no maudlin sense of mourning in my soul at this realization. I felt an irritating frustration, of course. But this business of being dead, of finding yourself a ghost, wasn't the morbidly terrifying thing it is supposed to be. I felt—except for that sense of irritated frustration about Jo—pretty darned fine. I can't explain it, of course. You have to try things like that for yourself.

And even where Jo was concerned, I was suddenly determined to find some way to make the best of that. After all, I was a ghost, and ghosts are supposed to have supernatural powers and all that sort of thing. I decided to see what I could do about things.

The ambulance had roared off down the highway to the right, and so I stepped out close to the traffic lanes, and pointing my thumb in that direction, tried to hitch a lift.

If I hadn't been run over by a twelve ton truck, some five minutes later, I might have gone on trying to shag a lift indefinitely, unaware that no one could see me. But as I said, the truck thundered down at me, and before I could leap to one side, tore right into me—but *through* me!

This experience left me shaken but grateful. For if I hadn't been a ghost I most certainly would have been killed!

I **CROSSED** over to where a car was parked on the edge of the pavement. Its occupants were returning, chattering goulishly, from an inspection of my demolished monoplane. I climbed into the back seat and sat down just before they did.

A fat woman, with a plumed hat and gray hair, was one of the group. She was talking as they climbed into the car.

"It's horrible," she declared, shuddering. "That poor fellow never had a chance!"

She sat down on—or *through*—my lap. It wasn't uncomfortable, for in my status there was plenty of room for everyone, and I evidently didn't take up any space that they could use.

A middle-aged man, also fat, was driving the car. There was a younger fellow in the front with him, and a young woman and a baby in the back with the gray-haired old doll and myself.

Pretty soon we were rolling along in the same direction that the ambulance had taken. From their conversation I learned that it was Steuberberg, a fairly large town.

I smoked all the way, wondering vaguely what I'd do when I ran out of ghost cigarettes, and listening to their morbid chatter about my crack-up. It began to pall on me, and after a while I turned my attention to the scenery whipping by.

When we arrived in Steuberberg, I climbed out at the first gas station stop they made. There, checking the telephone book, I got a list of the hospitals in the community. Then I tore it up, for I recalled that I was more than a hospital case.

At a newstand, the first one I came to after leaving the gas station, I saw a headline.

"RONNIE SAYERS KILLED IN PLANE CRASH HERE!" it said.

That was satisfying. Even the people in Steuberberg knew who I was, or had heard vaguely about my being a prominent sportsman pilot. I felt a slight glow of personal pride, and followed a man for a block and a half while I read the news account over his shoulder. It was an irritating way to read a paper. But I found out what I wanted.

My body was being taken back to Brock City for burial on Friday. This was Wednesday. That gave me all of two days to get back there. Plenty of time. Even for a ghost. That's what I thought.

For the rest of the day, and straight through the following day and night, I had a maddening time trying to work my way back to Brock City. I hitchhiked, of course, because my first ride had been so successful that way. But I ran into snarls I hadn't expected.

Human hitchhikers had one advantage over ghost thumbs that I didn't realize till then. The human hitchhiker—who could make himself heard—was easily able to find out the destination of his driver. I was not so fortunate, and on at least six occasions was taken miles off my course by unexpected detours of the persons with whom I rode.

And on each occasion I was obliged to wait a chance to get out of the car at a gas station stop or thru highway sign. It was all very irritating.

Then of course there were the two

occasions in which I was forced to leave the automobiles of my unwitting benefactors because of the intrusion I felt I made on their privacy. In each case, my pilots were a young, amorously inclined couple. And in each case I felt acutely embarrassed. Those things happen to ghosts, you know.

On Friday morning, however, I at last arrived in Brock City. And promptly at ten o'clock on said morning, I sat on the edge of the pulpit in Saint Peter's Church, watching the crowds fill the pews for the beginning of my funeral.

UP IN the loft, the organist was giving out with majestically mournful rendition of the Funeral March, and up the middle of the church, escorted by cutaway-clad pallbearers, came my casket!

I could see the side-front pews. They were filled with a number of weeping, aged women. I couldn't recall ever having seen them before in my life. And I say life without meaning a pun.

A small, clerically garbed, white-haired minister stood at the front railing in the church, looking sad and righteous as the procession moved slowly along to the strains of the majestic organ.

I could see the faces of the pallbearers now. There was Wiffy Skene, my handball partner from the City Club. Wiffy looked very sad, and I could understand this inasmuch as we were to have played in the finals of the doubles championship four days hence. Behind Wiffy, also guiding the casket along with solemn sorrow, was big, blond Brad Noddinger. It was hard to understand why Brad looked so sad. He'd owed me over a thousand dollars in poker debts. He wouldn't have to pay them now.

The other pallbearers, of course, were

also quite familiar to me. Some were good eggs, others—two at any rate—I thoroughly despised.

Then there was a small, mourning-clad group following the pallbearers. Most of their heads were bent, but I could make out the identities well enough.

Jo, of course, was the first to attract my attention. There was a momentary sharp, aching tug at my heart when she raised her head for an instant. She wore a black veil, and her face was white and determined beneath it. I wanted to run down the aisle, to put my arm around her and say, "Look, honey. Everything's going to be all right. Give me a smile, huh?"

She held her uncle's arm. He was a white-haired, red-faced old boy. Not a bad fellow. He looked sorrowful, and I couldn't tell if it was because of me, or merely due to the strain Jo was under.

On the other side of Jo, guiding her along, was a tall, black-haired, sharp-nosed chap named Duane Pearson. Pearson was a fraud, a phony, a louse. In short, I'd never liked him. He cheated at golf and snarled at his cad-dies. He was looking for a fortune to stick his paws to.

I had always suspected that he had a fondness for Jo.

Even though I'd like to have climbed from my pulpit perch and punched him on the nose, I stayed where I was. Gentlemen don't make scenes at their own funerals.

THE casket was finally at the front of the church, and the mourners were seated in their pews. If I do say so, I'd packed the house in this last performance. I felt a pardonable rush of pride at this realization.

Suddenly I had to move over slightly in my perch on the edge of the pulpit,

for the white-haired little minister was marching up the stairs to deliver his eulogy.

After looking up and down the packed church for a few hesitant moments, the little minister cleared his throat. Someone in the pews coughed. Far in the back of the church, a baby whined slightly.

"Friends," the little minister said solemnly, and I was amazed at the deep, rich power of his voice. "Friends, we are gathered here today on what, for all of us, is an especially sad occasion."

With no thought of being disrespectful, I pulled out a cigarette, lighted it, and settled back to enjoy myself.

"We all knew and loved Ronald Sayers," he declared.

"*You might have loved me, but you never knew me,*" I retorted. But of course he didn't hear.

The old women in the side pews—the ones I'd never seen before—snuffled audibly at this.

"His passing," the minister went on, "has left naught but hollow emptiness in the bosoms of each and every one of us."

"*Get on with it,*" I said, and again, of course, wasn't heard.

"Death is a dreadful thing," the minister observed.

"*You're wrong about that,*" I challenged. "*It isn't at all bad.*"

Of course the minister went right on.

"It strikes unexpectedly, swiftly, and finally. But it is the end to which we all must go sooner or later."

This was getting a little boring. Too many vague generalities. I stirred restlessly. So did a number of others in the pews.

The minister struck out on a new tack. I suspect that he sensed his audience slipping away.

"Ronald Sayers was a fine, clean, up-standing young man," he declared. And

there was a challenging note in his voice I didn't like.

"No one who had any contact with him failed to love him," the little old man continued.

"*Bosh*," I snorted. He was painting me as wishy-washy.

"His works of charity, kindness, mercy, and love were known to all."

"*At least the last named*," I agreed.

"Ronald Sayers is not survived by any living relatives," said the minister. I thought of my drunken Uncle Pete, who was pensioned off in Tahiti, and who would be in as soon as he heard the news of my death, both paws grabbing for what was left.

"But there are many of us to whom Ronald was more than kin, more than a brother, more than a father," the minister asserted.

"*Please*," I protested. "*Leave that stuff to Washington*." I was beginning to feel a slight irritation that this windy master of vague generalities had been selected to preach my funeral sermon. I got up from my perch and silently slipped down the stairs while his voice droned on.

VAULTING the railing, I stepped over to my casket and climbed comfortably atop, curling my arms around my knees. Now I could concentrate on gazing at Jo, who was less than ten feet away. I'd lost interest in the sermon by now.

Jo was bearing up well. Stiff upper lip and all that. This pleased me, for I knew she had courage, and the very genuineness of her white-faced restraint was stronger than a thousand tears.

I felt badly about not being able to tell her, of course. But there was still nothing I could do about things until I became thoroughly familiar with the powers and privileges of my new status as a ghost.

It was exceptionally irking, on the other hand, to watch Duane Pearson sitting beside her and patting her hand in solicitous understanding. Pearson and I had never gotten along well, although Jo had never been aware of this.

He had a small moustache beneath his sharp, long nose, and now and then he brushed it like a self-conscious cat, looking out of the corner of his eye to see if people noticed how fine he was being about it all.

I wished then that ghosts could throttle people like they do in books. I'd have gladly choked Pearson into unconsciousness. But of course my gaze returned to Jo. And in my mind I tried to tell her things.

Maybe my mental wireless had some results, for I seemed to notice a strange change occurring in her. She was still white-faced, but the unhappiness in her eyes was replaced by a sort of hidden understanding. As though she heard me, and knew how I'd want her to feel. The time must have raced by, as I sat there atop my casket drinking in the loveliness of her. Time had always done that in the past when I looked at Jo.

But at any rate, before I was aware of it, the services were over and the pallbearers were leaving the pews and grouping around the casket while the organ picked up its funeral dirge once more.

I climbed off the casket and waited until Jo and the group of immediate mourners fell in behind it as they began to move out of the church. I walked along, then, right behind Jo, still sending out those mental telepathic messages. And they seemed to be going over better than ever, for I saw her little shoulders square, and her chin went up.

Pearson still marched beside Jo, and had I been able to, I'd have planted a

ghostly kick on the seat of his well-tailored morning coat.

I STOOD at the top of the steps outside the church, undecided, watching them put the casket in the hearse, and looking a bit wistfully after Jo and the others as they climbed into the long black mourner's limousines.

And it was then that they grabbed my arm.

When I say "they", I mean two other ghosts!

And when I say "grabbed my arm", I mean just that, for they were forcibly restraining me there on the top of the church steps!

They almost scared me to death—, I mean out of my wits. One was a tall, heavy, red-faced fellow with a jovial air and twinkling eyes. The other was a little man, pinch-faced, skinny, yet somehow instantly likable. How did I know they were ghosts? Well they grabbed my arm, for one thing, and for another, the big fellow boomed.

"Hello, Brother Ronnie, welcome to our city!"

Somehow my wits returned.

"Who, what, ho—" I began.

The big, fat, jovial, red-faced ghost grinned.

"A bit of a surprise, eh?" His voice was a boom. "Never occurred to you that there were other ghosts trooping around beside yourself, eh?"

"Yeah," said the skinny little pinch-faced ghost, "it never occurs to any of us."

"Nice funeral you've just had," the big ghost complimented.

"Thanks," I answered. "But look," my gaze flew down to the black limousine moving away from the curb after the hearse, the limousine in which Jo was riding, "I've got some things to attend to. If you two will look me up some other time I'm sure we can com-

pare some interesting notes, and—"

"The rest of the funeral will get along by itself," the big ghost boomed. "My name is Manners. Brother Manners, if you wish."

"I'm glad to meet you, Brother Manners," I answered, trying to get my arm loose. "But you see—"

Brother Manners didn't release his firm grasp on my arm. "And the ghost to your left," he went on, "is Brother Bead. I know you'll be anxious to meet the rest of the boys."

"Look," I demanded frantically, "it's all very nice realizing I won't be lonely in my new life. But if we could put this off till some other time I'd—"

"Sorry," boomed Brother Manners firmly, "but this is as far as you're allowed to go."

"ALLOWED to go?" I was properly frantically indignant.

"By the Royal Order of Brothers of the Shroud," big Brother Manners answered cheerfully. "Section two, article five. No ghost is allowed to follow his funeral procession further than the church services. It might be too depressing."

"Royal Order of Brothers of the Shroud?" I felt as if I were losing my mind.

"The International Ghost Union," Brother Bead piped up squeakily. "We're president and vice president of Local Nine, here in Brock City."

I could see that the hearse, followed by the long automobile procession, was now at least four blocks away.

"But you don't understand," I pleaded. "My girl, my fiancée, is in that procession. I want to be with her. I want to be able—"

"Plenty of time for that," Brother Manners boomed with sympathetic, but firm, understanding.

"Yes, plenty of time for that,"

Brother Bead squeaked in echo. They both still kept unyielding grips on my arms. I watched the last cars of the automobile procession turn a corner six blocks down.

"All right," I said resignedly. "What must I do now?"

"That's better," boomed Brother Manners heartily.

"Much better," piped Brother Bead.

"We'll just jump into a car," said Brother Manners, "and whip over to the lodge meeting. It's going on now. The brothers will all be glad to see you. We haven't had a famous member in our chapter for quite some time."

They led me down the steps, still holding onto my arms. A car was moving at a fair amount of speed past the church. Before I knew it, Brothers Manners and Bead had whipped me out into the street, and still holding me, had leaped onto the running board of the machine!

Brother Bead saw the expression on my face.

"Don't let it scare you," he said. "It's easy. There are lots of tricks you'll get to learn in a short while." And with that, they pushed me *through* the side of the car and into the back seat!

There were two people in the back of the car, and one person—a girl—driving in the front. We sat down on the two in the back seat, and Brother Manners pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket.

"Have one?" he offered.

I reached over past the nose of the middle-aged man on whose lap I was sitting, and said, "Thanks."

We sat there, then, smoking and talking as the car rolled along.

"We might have picked a larger car," Brother Manners apologized with a wave of his hand. "But we're in a bit of a hurry."

"What's this all going to be about?"

I asked. "I mean, this lodge business?"

"It's simple, Brother Ronnie," Brother Bead piped up. "You've got to meet the brothers before joining the association. Sort of a formal introduction, y'know."

"I don't mean to be rude," I told them, "but supposing I don't care to join?"

Brother Manners laughed in booming heartiness.

Brother Bead chuckled squeakily.

"You have to join," Brother Manners explained.

"All ghosts have to," Brother Bead added. "If they want to amount to anything."

"What good does it do me?" I insisted.

"You'll learn the tricks of your trade. You'll learn to spook for yourself, so to speak," Brother Manners explained. "We can teach you a lot. We can show you that we've got a pretty swell organization, and that this new life is finer than any other—especially the one you've just left."

"Somehow," I answered, "I feel already as if it is."

Brother Bead nodded.

"You get that hunch immediately. I know I did."

"**H**OW many members do you have?"

I asked curiously.

"As many," Brother Manners waved his hand vaguely, "as there are good eggs who've died."

"You said good eggs," I replied. "What do you mean by that?"

"Not everyone who dies gets to be a ghost," Brother Bead piped up proudly. "Oh my no, not everybody."

"Well, well," I said, feeling as if it was all I could say, "that's something to be proud of, eh?"

"You bet it is," Brother Manners

boomed. "Only people who die violent deaths, and who've learned to live well, and who are good eggs, can be ghosts."

"Well that does limit it a bit, I imagine," I told him.

"Yes," said Brother Bead, squeakily. "And you have to die under a certain age to be eligible."

"Fifty," said Brother Manners. "You have to be under fifty, in addition to the other requirements."

"I'm learning a lot already," I declared. "People have such silly ideas about ghosts in life, don't they?"

"They're superstitious," Brother Bead piped in reedy scorn.

The car in which we were riding was whipping along at a great rate of speed now, somewhere around fifty miles an hour. Looking out the window I could see we were still in the city, but traveling along a wide stretch of super boulevard.

"You'll find our lodge exceptionally mutually beneficial," Brother Bead declared. "I don't know what I'd have done without it. I tell you, when I died I didn't know a soul. Wasn't on speaking acquaintance with a single ghost."

Brother Manners nodded.

"We taught Brother Bead lots of things he'll never regret learning." He suddenly looked out the window. There was the Brock City municipal stadium a half a block away. "There we are," Brother Manners boomed heartily. "Might as well get ready to step out."

"You mean that's your lodge headquarters?" I gasped.

Brother Bead nodded.

"Certainly. It's very seldom in use more than once a week by humans. We try to arrange our meetings not to conflict with the regular schedules in the stadium."

"Although once or twice," amended Brother Manners, "we've had to hold

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emergency meetings while prizefights and rodeos were going on."

I could only gasp. And just in time, too, for in the next instant we were passing the municipal stadium and brothers Manners and Bead were whipping me *through* the side and out of the car onto the street.

"Thanks," Brother Manners boomed after the car, bowing politely.

I was still shaken by the apparently effortless manner in which we alighted from the swiftly moving car. No jar. No jolt. I remember regretfully the countless miles I allowed myself to be carried out of the way, just a few hours back, in hitchhiking to Brock City. And at any time, it was now apparent, I could have stepped out of the car when my drivers turned off on side highways. I chuckled.

"What's so funny, Brother Ronnie?" Brother Bead asked.

I told him.

Brother Manners and Brother Bead laughed heartily at this.

"You see what we mean?" Brother Manners said. "You've a lot to learn before you can spook for yourself. All sorts of tricks."

"Heh-heh-heh," Brother Bead shrilled. "Think of it, waiting for a gas station before daring to get out!" This seemed to tickle him.

"Well," said Brother Manners, removing his paw from my arm, "we might as well get started."

THE three of us moved up to the sidewalk and headed for the huge front doors of the municipal stadium. There was a big sign on the front of the door, reading "LODGE MEETING TONIGHT. PROMINENT SPOOKERS TO BE HEARD!"

I stopped aghast.

"That sign," I choked.

"Yes?" Brother Manners said casu-

ally. "What about it?"

"Can't live people see it?" I demanded.

Brother Manners chuckled heartily.

"Of course not. It's a ghost sign. You'll learn about them."

Of course we walked right through the doors of the municipal stadium. It was very hard for me to get used to this neat trick of ghostery. But what we encountered just inside the doors was even worse. Three tall ghosts, wearing long gray shrouds, faces hidden by voluminous cowls, greeted us!

I stepped back, startled.

Brother Bead chuckled squeakily.

"Don't be afraid, Brother Ronnie," he said. "These are brothers. They're just wearing the lodge uniforms."

Silently, the three new "brothers" handed us three shroud-cowl outfits. And by watching brothers Manners and Bead I was able to don my costume over my street clothes without any particular trouble. I could hear a babble of voices coming from inside the stadium proper. Evidently the meeting was in full session.

It was, and I saw as much immediately upon stepping through the last doors and into the vast stadium hall. Almost all the main floor chairs of the stadium were occupied by hooded gray figures. And I saw that they were grouped around a prize ring—there was evidently going to be a fight the following night—and enthusiastically raising hell.

Brother Manners touched my arm reassuringly.

"There they are," he said proudly.

"A fine group, a great gang."

I noticed then, for the first time, that some of the "brothers" carried large placards—the kind you see at political conventions—bearing various legends.

MORE PAY AND SHORTER SHROUDS, declared one of the placards.

DOWN WITH SCAB HOUSE HAUNTERS, declaimed a second.

A third, and very windy placard asserted that, **AMERICAN UNION OF AMALGAMATED CHAIN RATTLERS IS 100% BEHIND NATIONAL DEFENSE!**

This was indeed reassuring, and I told Brother Manners so.

"We're a patriotic bunch," he declared solemnly.

OUR entrance was noticed for the first time, for there was a burst of cheering and applause, as hundreds of hooded heads turned in our direction. Brothers Manners and Bead, throwing out their chests proudly, took me by the arm and led me down the aisle through the cheering throngs and up into the boxing ring.

There was a short, rotund, shrouded little ghost already in the ring, and Brothers Manners introduced me to him.

"Brother Wumpf, here, is our secretary. Brother Wumpf, meet our new brother, Ronnie Sayers."

Brother Wumpf extended a fat, cordial paw and grinned charmingly from inside his shroud.

"Glad to know you, Brother Ronnie," he said cheerfully. "I've been waiting to meet you. Have a nice trip?"

"Oh, jolly," I answered lamely. "Just ripping."

Then Brother Manners stepped to the center of the ring, holding up his arms for silence. Almost instantly, the ghost crowds subsided.

"Brothers," declared Brother Manners loudly, "we have with us this afternoon a new and rather famous member, Brother Ronnie Sayers!"

This was the signal for instantaneous and gratifying applause. Brother Manners let it continue for a while, then raised his arms again.

"He will be apprenticed immediately upon your approval. And we'll take a rising vote on the question." He paused. "All in favor of admitting the new brother please stand."

There was the sound of many shrouds sliding against wood as the crowd rose in unison.

"Fine," said Brother Manners, and the "yeas" resumed their seats.

"Now all those against the proposal," boomed Brother Manners.

No one rose.

Brother Manners turned, grinning from ear to ear.

"Welcome, Brother Ronnie Sayers. We're glad to have you!" he grabbed my hand.

The stadium broke into cheers. I blushed, shuffling a bit in awkward embarrassment, while successively, Brothers Bead and Wumpf gripped my hand. Now Brother Manners took my hand again, in a curious fashion, folding my fingers oddly.

"This," declared Brother Manners, "is the lodge grip." He paused solemnly. "Practice it and remember it. It will mean much to you in years to come."

I shook hands again with Brothers Bead and Wumpf, this time with the lodge grip. Everyone was very happy.

At last Brother Manners stepped up to the front of the ring again and spread his arms wide. And again the silence was quick in settling over the noisy crowd.

"Has all the business been concluded before our arrival?" he asked. There was a thundering chorus of "Yeesssss!"

Brother Manners smiled.

"Then I move we adjourn until the next meeting," he suggested. "All in favor please rise."

For the second time there was the sound of shrouds sliding against wooden chairs. All the brothers had risen as a man, or as a ghost.

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"The ayes have it," trumpeted Brother Manners. "Meeting adjourned for the day!"

I TURNED to Brother Bead.

"This has been swell of you," I began, "and now, if you don't mind, I'll leave you for a little while to—"

Brother Manners broke in on me.

"Leave?" he laughed. "Don't be silly, Brother Ronnie. You're now one of us. You're an apprentice in our lodge, our union."

I frowned. I didn't like the cheer in his voice. I was thinking only of getting to Jo as quickly as possible.

"Which means what?"

"Which means," put in fat Brother Wumpf happily, "that you're to be apprenticed out to our New York branch for training."

"For training," I blurted. "But—"

"You'll have to learn to spook for yourself," Brother Bead reminded me squeakily. "We teach you how. Being a ghost isn't easy, you know."

"And how long," I demanded, thinking of Jo, and that snake in the grass Duane Pearson, "does this apprenticeship last?"

"Three months," Brother Manners said cheerfully.

"Look!" I exploded. And then, carefully, I told them exactly what I thought of the apprenticeship period, and why. "And so," I concluded, "you can't blame me for saying 'excuse me' until I take care of the matter."

Brother Bead looked disapproving.

"Can you use your ghostly powers to their full advantage?" he challenged.

"No," I admitted, "but—"

"Are you thoroughly capable of taking care of yourself in your new status?" Brother Wumpf broke in.

"I don't know," I acknowledged, "but—"

"You're foolish to venture forth

without instruction," Brother Manners said. "Why, you don't even know how to use your voice so that humans can hear you."

I had to blink at this.

"Can I learn?" I asked, amazed.

Brother Bead smiled, and squeaked,

"Certainly, and plenty more!"

"You know how to lift things, how to physically touch people, or, say, hit them?" Brother Wumpf challenged.

"I never thought of that" I admitted. Proper control of those powers would be a good thing to know, and I could see it.

"Well, then," Brother Manners summed it up. "We'll apprentice you out. You'll learn all these things. Three months won't make that much difference in your plans. In fact, they'll be a help. You'll be thoroughly adjusted by then."

I took a deep breath.

"All right," I said. "I'm game!"

BROTHERS Bead, Manners, and Wumpf had been quite correct. I had a lot to learn. The next three months, although they positively flew by, turned me from a bungling amateur into a first class and quite professional ghost.

I was apprenticed out to a kindly, middle-aged ghost in the Bronx. His name was Brother Watkins, and from him I got my basic training. It seemed that Brother Watkins had a select clientele of swamies, soothsayers, spiritualists and mystics—who knew about such things—for whom he did most of his work.

I learned how to impersonate voices. How to appear when I wanted to, and disappear when I wanted to. I became an expert at tilting tables and making objects float about rooms. I developed a special, hollow, ghostly voice which I could use when the occa-

sion demanded it.

Now and then Brother Watkins sent me out on house haunting assignments, the first few of which scared the day-lights out of me. But I learned to clank chains professionally, and if you don't think this a difficult feat, try it sometime—any time. There is a delicate, rotating wrist motion necessary to make professional clanking.

Brother Watkins knew his stuff. And from him I learned other things. We used to go for walks in the off hours, and in these long strolls he told me endless tales of ghost history and lore, filling up my background on that subject very neatly.

Although I'd been sure that everything seemed far from morbid or unpleasant from the very first hours in which I was a ghost, I learned from Brother Watkins that this new life was not only not bad, but that it was distinctly superior to my previous existence as a human. There was no struggle for existence, for example, because sustaining life was quite unnecessary.

Eating was superficial. But Brother Watkins gave me ghost pills which had all the pleasures of fine meals—from the standpoint of sensation—at any time that I felt a craving for a thick steak or pheasant dressing. Ghost cigarettes were plentiful, and I learned that the lodge had an undiminishing supply of them which it gave freely to any member. Smoking was, incidentally, still as enjoyable as ever.

And, most important of all, ghosts didn't grow old. They stayed just as they were at the time they became ghosts. I, for example, was entitled to perpetual youth.

Boredom, too, was out. For as ghosts we had the opportunity to live beside the world for the duration of its existence—watching it change, struggle,

and improve itself. Our task, over and above the mundane jobs of ghosting as humans expected us to, was dedicated to—of all things—“making the world a better place in which to live!”

And there was no gloom, no pall, to hang over as in the case of live human beings. Ghosts are an exceptionally good natured, easy-going, cheerful lot. The ghost world—I learned—was an utterly blissful one, a real Shangri La.

Personally, I would have been quite blissfully contented with my lot. Certainly I had no envy for the world I'd left behind me. As I say, I'd have been perfectly contented, but for one thing.

Jo was still in my mind.

I told this to Brother Watkins on one of our strolls. He shook his head sympathetically.

“It isn't easy,” he agreed. “But those things have a way of working out.”

I told him that I hoped he was right. But his only reply was an understanding smile. And as I said, time raced by, and before I knew it, my apprenticeship was up. I was finally ready to go forth to spook for myself.

“I suppose you'll be heading back to Brock City,” Brother Watkins said, taking my hand in the lodge grip.

I nodded.

“But I'll be seeing you soon,” I insisted.

Brother Watkins smiled.

“There's plenty of time,” he replied. “Plenty of time.”

I hesitated. Brother Watkins was a good scout.

“Say hello to the boys back in Brock City,” Brother Watkins said. “Give them my best.”

“I will,” I assured him. “I certainly will.”

I TOOK a train back to Brock City. That was one of the things I'd
SPOOK FOR YOURSELF

learned from Brother Watkins. Ghosts don't necessarily have to hitchhike wherever they go. After all, a ghost has as much privacy on a first class vehicle of transportation as anywhere else. You'd be surprised at the number of ghosts traveling the country first class.

Before leaving the depot in the heart of Brock City, I took great pains in primping up and getting ready to look my best for Jo. After all, three months was a long time to be away. She wouldn't see me, of course, although by now I'd learned how to enable her to do so if I wished. The principle of the thing, however, was what counted.

By telephoning a depot taxi stand from a booth a few hundred feet away, I arranged my transportation out to Jo's suburban estate. We use your telephone communications frequently.

In this case I called the nearby taxi stand, told them a cab was wanted at Jo's place. Then I walked over to the stand until I saw the starter give the order to a cabbie. I climbed in, then, and settled back with a cigarette to vision how lovely Jo would look when I arrived.

Brother Watkins had taught me a lot.

After a ride of a little less than an hour, the cab turned up the gravel drive leading to the sprawling manor which belonged jointly to Jo and her Uncle Chester—he's the one who was on the other side of her at my funeral.

It was a distinct treat to see the place again after all those weeks. And when the indignant cab driver argued with the butler, insisting that someone had called for a taxi, I climbed out of the hack and took a leisurely stroll around the familiar old grounds.

Five minutes later, after the taxicab had angrily snarled off down the gravel driveway, I was comfortably seated in the shade of the trees off the tennis

court, looking at the carved initials on the trunks—Jo's and mine—and indulging in a lot of pleasant nostalgia.

It was late afternoon, and the sun was going down, giving a little chill to the air. I was making up my mind to get inside and have a look around, when I heard footsteps on the turf behind me. I scrambled quickly to my feet and looked around.

There was Jo!

I TELL you, it was all I could do to keep from making my voice audible, my appearance visible. Her lovely red hair, her pert little nose, the cool depths of her beautiful gray eyes—all were exactly as I remembered them. The eyes weren't quite so cool, of course, for they were troubled and uncertain.

It was all I could do to keep from putting my arms around her. I stepped back as she moved toward me. She seemed to be walking idly, almost unconsciously. And now I saw that her eyes were moist. She had been crying.

Jo stood beside the tree I'd been sitting under moments before. Her hand reached out and lightly touched the place in the trunk where we'd carved our initials.

"Ronnie," she said softly. "Oh, Ronnie. I hope I'm doing the right thing. They tell me I am, Ronnie. They tell me that it's what you'd want me to do. But I wouldn't, except that nothing matters any more."

I was so choked up inside that I didn't realize I'd moved close to her, almost close enough to put my arms around her. And then an amazing thing happened.

The troubled doubt left her eyes.

"Ronnie," she breathed. "It's—it's just as if you're right beside me. I'd swear you were close enough to put your arms around me."

Frankly, I'm not the superstitious

sort, but this made my spine tingle.

And then she turned, in a happy, dazed sort of way, and began to walk back to the sprawling old manor. I had to stand there and let her go, while I tried to drown a few emotions and stop my mind from whirling.

Somehow I felt wildly, joyously happy. Jo still loved me. Jo would always love me!

But suddenly it occurred to me. What had she said? What was all that stuff about what "they" wanted her to do? Something, a ghostly premonition, if you will, made me feel decidedly uneasy all of a sudden.

Just then a large maroon limousine turned up the driveway, and minutes later, as I watched the passengers get out, chattering gaily, and enter the house, I decided that something screwy was certainly going on. And whatever that something was, I'd soon know what it was all about!

WITH the cunning and skill that only Brother Watkins could have developed in me, I used my ghostly advantages to thoroughly investigate everything and everybody in the huge, sprawling manor. I listened to servants conversing. I rummaged through drawers in Uncle Chester's study. I cut myself in on the conversation among the recently arrived guests. And this is what I learned.

Jo was going to marry Duane Pearson!

It took me less than an hour to find this out. And it took me less time than that to find out the "why" of it. Obviously not herself in the months that followed my death, Jo's guidance had been snakily taken over by the thin nosed Pearson.

He had passed himself off at first as one of my very best friends. Which was a bare-faced fraud. Then, ingra-

tiating himself with her Uncle Chester—who although a likeable old duck was none too bright—the bounder worked his way around to suggesting marriage as the only thing to give Jo a new life.

Jo, poor kid, had protested against this at first. But being in a state of almost constant dazed bewilderment, she'd been literally pushed into agreeing before she knew what was going on. And now, this very evening, as attested by the guests who had already arrived, Jo's Uncle Chester—the blithering ass—was going to announce her engagement to Duane "Stinker" Pearson!

I don't have to tell you what my reactions to this were. I had a first blinding flash of rage in which I decided I would throttle Duane Pearson the moment he arrived at the manor. But then, reason made me discard this, inasmuch as it wouldn't help poor Jo's already distraught state of mind.

I paced back and forth around the house as guests continued to arrive. They were admitted to the lounge, where cocktails were being served, and where Jo and her Uncle Chester received them. It wouldn't do me any good to look at Jo again, I felt badly enough as it was. So I stayed out of the lounge and panthered back and forth over the rest of the house, wrestling with the problem in my mind.

About five o'clock, I hit on an idea—or I should say a series of ideas. And by five-fifteen, I determined that this would be my best and only course. I got Brother Manners on the telephone.

"Look," I said, after talking about three minutes, "have you got all that straight?"

"Certainly, Brother Ronnie," he said heartily. "You can depend on me to come through. Glad to be of help."

"It means everything," I reminded him.

"Count on it," he repeated. "We're

happy to help."

I'D LEARNED from the conversation of the servants that the dinner would begin at seven o'clock, and that the engagement would be announced at the conclusion of the fourth course. This would give me sufficient time to build up to the desired climax—I hoped.

After my conversation with Brother Manners, I went back to the door of the lounge and stood there moodily peering in at the guests and listening to the conversation. Jo, as I said before, moved around through all this mechanically, like a person in a bad dream.

But when the butler announced, "Mr. Duane Pearson!" I went into action.

Pearson came strutting up to the door of the lounge like a particularly nasty cat might look just after topping off a dinner of hapless canary. He was wearing evening clothes, and poised dramatically at the door, he touched the corner of the little moustache that hid beneath his long sharp nose. This was his moment of triumph.

Smiling, Pearson stepped over the threshold.

Also smiling, I stuck out my foot, tripped him neatly, and sent him sprawling headlong into the room on his face!

The confusion was immediate, not to mention several hysterical giggles and one or two repressed curses from Pearson himself as two servants helped him to his feet.

I slipped into the lounge as the embarrassment subsided and the conversation resumed again some two minutes later. Pearson, looking like a ruffled peacock, after having paid his respects to Jo and Uncle Chester, had now moved over to chat with some friends.

When I saw the butler bringing a tray of drinks Pearson's way, I moved over beside him and bided my time.

"She's really lovely, and I'm certainly lucky," Pearson said to one of his friends, after taking a glass from the tray.

"Here's to you both," someone said.

Pearson raised his glass. It was a gallant gesture, and would have gone over quite well if I hadn't reached out and tilted the contents down on him just as he'd lifted the cocktail to its peak!

Of course, this led to a great deal more confusion, and resulted in Pearson looking like a drenched duck, or an angry fish. Take your choice. I was beginning to be glad I'd come.

Old Uncle Chester was beginning to fix Pearson with a beady eye, as though trying to decide if the young man had been drinking heavily before his arrival. Other guests were beginning to snicker in his direction.

And Pearson, although still wearing a fixed smile, was beginning to look grim around the corners of his mouth. So far so good.

Of course, when he took another drink from another tray, I managed to have him spill it quite completely over a dowager who sat beside him. This resulted in angry shrieks, much more confusion, and a growing hysterical gleam in Pearson's eyes.

I was working smoothly, and on each occasion I thanked Brother Watkins.

PEARSON, grimly deciding that there would be a certain safety in being seated, sought an empty chair with his eyes. When at last he located it, I beat him to it.

This, I must admit, is crude. But he was a sucker for the old pull-the-chair-away-as-they-sit-down gag. And since there was no one to notice it mov-

ing just enough, and since no one was within five feet of the chair, Duane Pearson was forced to a lot of apologetic apologies and explanations after he'd picked himself up from the floor.

The hysteria in his eyes was swiftly approaching the cracking point. I was getting quite pleased with myself, when, unexpectedly, old Uncle Chester rose and announced dinner.

It was an obvious move to get ahead with things before further disaster started. And realizing this, I had to curse. This shot my time schedule all to hell. The time schedule I'd given to Brother Manners. And if Manners were too late— I hated to think of it.

Still crude, but still effective, I worked the chair stunt on Pearson again as they all sat down to dine. There must have been thirty guests to witness his shamefaced confusion as he came up from under the table.

But now I let up for a while, and turned my attention to Jo. A lot was going to depend on her ability to stand shock. It was risky business, and I didn't dare let it miss fire. My psychology had to be good—awfully good.

Jo had watched the various Pearson disasters with a vague blankness that was at once comforting, and disturbing. It was comforting to see that she obviously cared so little for him. But it was disturbing to think of the risk I was going to have to take while she was in such a condition.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to seven. I had told Brother Manners to get it here by a quarter after seven at the very latest. But now things were running ahead of my schedule.

Believe it or not, I began to feel cold sweat running down my spine. I tried to keep my eyes away from Jo, and busy myself with heckling Pearson.

Which was a mistake.

I'd just neatly spilled a bowl of soup in Pearson's lap, and he was on his feet howling while the rest of the guests looked on aghast, when old Uncle Chester, sensing that it would be now or never, stood up and began pounding on the side of his glass with his spoon. Pearson who, lips working madly, slumped back into his chair mopping his lap.

Now I knew that I'd again forced the time schedule up a notch. Old Uncle Chester, before the entire affair got out of control, was obviously going to announce the engagement now.

AND it was only seven o'clock! I looked at Jo, and felt that awful aching tug at my heart. If I'd messed this big chance—

Old Uncle Chester was clearing his throat.

"Hah, ahhhh, hah, er, hahahhh," he began. "Please, your attention, ladies and gentlemen." He clinked his spoon on the edge of the glass again as if to give himself confidence, and looked doubtfully at Duane Pearson.

"It is my—hah—extreme pleasure, hrrumph, to, ah announce this evening—hah—that my niece, Jo, is betrothed to—hah—, hph," he was off again, clearing his throat a mile a minute.

I wanted to die—if I'd been able to. It was that terrible. Brother Manners, I was now positive, would be too late.

"Kaff," Uncle Chester picked up with words again. "Where was I? Oh—hah, kaff, yes, I recall. To announce the betrothal of my niece, Jo, to—"

And at that instant, while I tried in agony to tear my eyes from Jo's almost pitiful expression of resignation, someone grabbed me from behind, and I wheeled to face Brother Manners.

He was breathless, triumphant.

But before he could open his mouth, I cried. "Gimme!" and took the box he held in his hands.

I tore the top off the box as I turned back to the table. Tore the top off and took one look at them and knew they were the real McCoy. Then, wildly, I was throwing them up into the air, over the table, watching them drifting down like so much green confetti.

Four leaf clovers—hundreds and hundreds of them!

They were falling everywhere, and to all the guests it was impossible to imagine from where they came. Out of thin air, it must have seemed to them. But not to Jo. I was watching Jo, and she picked up one, examining it curiously. Then her face was shining like a million haloes, and she stood up.

"Ronnie," she said. "You got them, you darling!" And her voice had that small girl squeal of delight in it I'd always loved. She was smiling, radiantly happy at what she knew.

THE confusion was frantic.

"Take care of things," I yelled to Brother Manners over my shoulder. "And thanks!" I was after Jo.

He nodded, and took over where I left off, throwing four leaf clovers over everyone—from nowhere. The confusion was now panic.

Jo had a head start on me, and I heard the motor of her little sports roadster starting in the garage. When it came thundering down the gravel roadway, I swung in beside her.

She must have felt my presence.

"Oh, Ronnie," she said. "I'm glad, so glad. I knew you'd come."

I didn't answer. The speedometer needle on the car said seventy, and was going up. I grinned. She was headed for the airport. Jo could fly a ship

as well as I could. And she had one there.

"You got the clovers," Jo said. And again there was that small kid joy in her voice. "I knew you would, Ronnie. You're so good about things."

I still didn't answer. I didn't have to.

When we got to the airport, Jo had them roll her ship out on the runway. And I was beside her when we took off. She was still radiant with happiness, her nose wrinkling in the elfin way it did when she grinned.

"You're right beside me, Ronnie," she said when she'd leveled the ship at three thousand. "I know it."

And now, for the first time, I let her

hear my voice.

"Sure I am, darling. And I'll always be."

"Oh, Ronnie. You sound so happy. It is happy there, isn't it?" she said. "I can't wait to see you."

She pressed the stick downward, throwing the plane into a nose over. Then she kicked the rudder pedals. We were spinning, and the ground was whirling crazily up to meet us!

"It won't be long before I'm in your arms, darling!" she shouted above the scream of the wind. She was beautiful and laughing. "It won't be any time at all!"

And of course it wasn't—it was merely a matter of seconds. . . .

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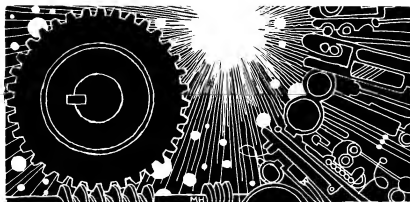
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FANTASY FANDOM

It is a sad fact that fantasy writers have not always enjoyed the recognition given to their science fiction counterparts. In the eyes of the mainstream critics fantasy was either strictly for children or slightly more suspect than science fiction. (Oh, there was James Branch Cabell, but he didn't write *fantasy*, he wrote imaginative humorous satire or *somesuch*.) Even in sf circles fantasy fandom was a minority movement. But Tolkien changed all that. Now large amounts of fantasy are being printed, read, and appreciated. Recognition has come.

Yet amid all this there is a serious lack. Science fiction has its Hugos and Nebulas, but as yet there is no separate fantasy award.

Before I start talking about fantasy awards I'd better establish, roughly, just what fantasy is. I consider a separate genre, closely allied with but distinct

from science fiction. Allied with in the sense that both do not limit their subject matter to the present and the immediate past; distinct from in that fantasy is not bound by the "some day this may be so" implied in science fiction. Fantasy is fiction containing elements generally not considered possible, but accepted for the purposes of the story.

Science fiction speculates about the future. The future has always been of interest to people, and this is the source of much of science fictions strength. But with this strength goes a weakness, the limit of plausibility. Science fiction often does more than appeal to our interest in the future; it can take us into another world, a world of wonder and imagination. But it is here that this weakness is felt, for in its quest for wonder and imagination it is limited to plausible futures.

Fantasy has no such limit. It is bound only by the author's imagination. Often this will take it in directions that look like science fiction, but more often it will not. The sub-forms of fantasy are many: heroic fantasy, mythic fantasy, surreal fantasy, sword and sorcery stories, horror stories, tall tales and fairy tales. Even so, many stories fit several categories, while others stubbornly resist all attempts at pigeonholing.

While there is some overlapping between the two fields, I think it's ridiculous for *Pavanne* and *Stand on Zanzibar* to be competing for the same award. Fantasy is more than just a branch of sf, and fantasy authors deserve more opportunity for recognition than the possibility of winning a science fiction award.

A fantasy award would be of great benefit to the genre. It would promote higher standards of writing. It would serve as an encouragement for writers to enter the field. And it would help promote a sense of unity within the genre.

If we're going to have a fantasy award we'll have to have some method of giving the thing away. In order to mean anything, an award must be given away by some Prestigious Body. Probably the easiest way would be to do it at the World Science Fiction convention.

I know it may seem somehow inconsistent for a fantasy award to be presented at a *science fiction* convention. But as I said, the two genres are closely allied. (Example: a magazine called FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION.) Also, science fiction fandom and fantasy fandom are very much united. Many fans, perhaps most fans (including myself), are both science fiction and fantasy fans. I think this union is a good thing, and I think it would weaken both genres to have the fantasy fans split off

and start a World Fantasy Convention or something. Different awards yes, but not different conventions.

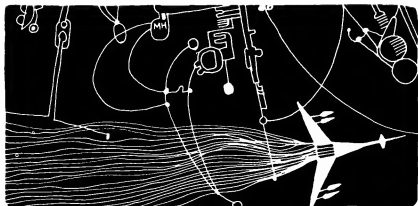
Of course, we could change the name of the convention. But we'd have to decide whether to call it the World Science Fiction and Fantasy Convention, or the World Fantasy and Science Fiction Convention. And even then there would be those wanting to call it the World Speculative Fiction Convention . . . I fear this would be the cause of bitter controversy, if not war. Perhaps the name is really all right as it is.

Much harder than deciding on a name for the convention is the task of deciding on a name for the fantasy award. When a person wins an Academy Award he gets an Oscar; the winner of the Nebula Award gets a Nebula. What will the winner of the fantasy award get? After pondering this question for weeks the answer has finally occurred to me: a VALKYRIE! Does not this very name invoke a vision of the fair servants of Odin streaking down to honor the bravest of the warriors by carting them off to Asgard? Could not fandom similarly honor the greatest Fantasy writers by bestowing upon them statuettes of these fair messengers? Just think—we would be the only group in the world to be giving away Norse Goddesses.

But what's that? When you think of Valkyries you see visions of a large soprano singing Wagnerian opera? Well, so much for that idea. You think of a name.

Actually, the name of the award is not of vital importance. What is of importance is that we have such an award. The fantasy genre deserves it, and needs it. I look forward to the day when the fantasy award is a reality.

—Michael Juergens



FANTASY BOOKS

The Guardians, #2/*Dark Ways To Death*, by Peter Saxon, Berkley, 60 cents, 143 p.

Back around 1960, John W. Campbell, Jr., editor of *ANALOG-ASTOUNDING*, assured me that a chess-playing computer wouldn't be programmed for many decades, if ever. He had a hot tip on this from the Bell Telephone Company.

Now for about five years a computer nicknamed MacHack has been playing in chess tournaments in this country. He has the rating of a C or, possibly, B player.

The Russians—Leningrad Institute—have a computer which appears to play in the A or, possibly, expert category. (Not the highest—those are master and grand master.) In a four-game match with a computer at Stanford University, he won one game quite brilliantly and was ahead in a second, when reportage stopped dead, even in Soviet news organs. I'd guess the Russians are superior here because they have the best chess-players and ask their aid in programming chess-playing computers. A wise procedure, if winning

be the object. While the American computers, except for being programmed from chess manuals, for the opening moves, may be self-taught, learning only, game by game, from their mistakes. Also as everyone knows, the Russians are chess-crazy and so would be more willing to spare no expense (computer-time being very costly) in this area.

One more approaching victory for the machine!—or, more accurately, the man-machine symbiote.

So my prediction, back around 1960, wasn't too inaccurate. Now, in 1970, I have another and more alarming deduction to communicate: that *The Guardians*, #2, a novel of supernatural horror, was written by a computer.

This notion has been the subject of a number of science-fiction stories, including my own novela, later expanded into a novel, *The Silver Eggheads*. But it's pretty chilling, especially to a writer, to suspect that it's actually begun to happen.

Yet the evidence is formidable.

The way I visualize it, this *Guardians-*

computer, besides general instructions including those on how to back-cover-blurb in Second-Coming type, all caps, **BLACK—MAGIC SATANISM —NECROMANCY**

and also how to alter language in order to avoid charges of plagiarism, is programmed chiefly with the texts of

(1) Ian Fleming's *Live and Let Die*, that second James Bond novel, where the romantic British agent's adversary is the obese Mr. Big, a genius-Black, who from his headquarters in Harlem by voodoo-intimidation controls a vast network of spies, smugglers, criminals, and Pullman employees. In *The Guardians*, #2 it's the skinny Dr. Obadiah Duval, doing the same general sort of thing in London, chiefly in abandoned branches of the Underground. But they both are or pretend to be incarnations of the dread Baron Samedi of the voodoo cult, the second wearing a tall black hat, the first always keeping it near at hand, while the second book begins with the Bond-redolant paragraph, "Death is a lonely time." Also Fleming's *Goldfinger* (in another Bond book, admittedly) says, "Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, but three times is enemy action," while in *Guardians*, #2, we have, "Once is chance, twice is coincidence, but when it's the Rule of Three, Lionel, what do you think this is all about?" A very good question, that last. Novel-writing computers seem to be very cautious engines. They admit they don't always know just what they're doing.

(2) Sax Rohmer's *Brood of the Witch Queen*, praised even by H.P. Lovecraft in his "Supernatural Horror in Literature" and to my mind containing two very well written chapters set in the now burnt Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, describing a masked ball there. In another section of

the book there is a moderately terrifying eruption of spiders from the basement of an old, dry house. In a charming parallel in *Guardians*, #2, one of the heroes and the heroine are trapped in a room in Dr. Duval's pet-shop containing two hundred catnapped cats intended for black sacrifice and individually caged. The heroine is physically exhausted from a period of psi activity. A gang of Dr. Duval's henchmen are breaking down the door. The hero (a) seats the heroine on a table provided with small wheels—castors; (b) opens the two hundred cages, loosing the mad domestic cats; (c) as the main door bursts open, manfully pushes the girl-bearing table through it to escape—aided by the cats, for as the book says, "No man could have stood against the impact of that furious animal torrent." A wonderful scene to visualize. I don't know anything like it except the many shots in the film *The Green Slime* where Playgirl nurses in an Earth satellite push the beds of helpless hospital patients out of the way of a horde of charmingly tentacle-waving, sparkler-flashing, scaled, green, one-eyed monsters;

(3) Any of P.G. Wodehouse's novels depicting the silly British upper class—for this is the comic relief in *Guardians*, #2. Lady Mabel Entworth keeps saying, "S-s-simply s-s-spiffing!" Or the lascivious Duchess of Derwentwater: "I'm itching to orge," (she does it, too—"her only garment the fragments of a silver lame evening gown") or (showing a fine knowledge of the habits of English aristocracy), "Her Grace's eyes were as frigid as the creme-de-menthe frappe which the Duke was dispensing from his personal cocktail shaker;" or a room filled with "well-bred bric-a-brac";

(4) Almost any new pop book about the

occult, so that we can be bowled over on page 6 by rapid-fire references to Hawaiian tahungas, Australian aborigines "pointing the bone," Inca priests, West Indian hongaans, old English witches, who stick pins in "mommets," and even the Biblical quote, "I will also send wild beasts among you." There is something most terrifying to me about the easy current acceptance of the occult—witness the swift-burgeoning popularity of astrology!—amongst many hippies and imitative types. They seem to identify Science with the Establishment and to be rebels against both. And they are oblivious to the point that Science is concerned with experiments which anyone can repeat and get identical results—an extremely different matter from "each person doing his own thing." For the basic emptiness and fakiness of this new outlook, consult the first seven articles in the March 1970 issue of *Esquire*, one of which is wisely called, "Banality of the New Evil;"

(5) But, getting back to the *Guardians*-computer, we now have it programmed. Next step is to push the Nordic heroine button five times. There come out Steven Kane, Gideon Cross, Father Dyball, Anne Ashby, and Lionel Marks. (How did that Jew get in here? Oh, of course, to counter accusations of racial prejudice—there is even a good Black in this book, one Jack Johnson . . . at one point he crawls for apparently several hundred yards with both legs and both arms broken; I find this hard to believe):

(6) Push the button once more to get the name of the author of *Guardians*, #2—Peter Saxon. Of course, there may be such a real person and he may have written this book, but I am deeply impressed with the point that on page 4 it is copyrighted by "Press Editorial

Services." Darkly sinister;

(7) Now set the scene-setting and atmosphere dials at minimum, the allusions and hints dials at zero, and let her rip!

The result is . . . quite strange. Apparently someone failed to push the Science button, with such results as, "Nocturnal, living on insects, bats had a good deal in common with Negley Prescott, if lobster and crab be accepted as insects—which they are." They aren't, though along with the arachnids they are all arthropods. (Negley loved shellfish.)

And then at page 133 the apparently outwardly normal Duke of Derwentwater stretches his "two or three fathoms of length." Twelve or 18 feet.

And this brilliant observation of objective fact: "The ceiling condensed the (marijuana) smoke in cold, acrid drops that stained the white shirts of the men with copper pennies."

However, we do have something on the wonderful mysteries of astronomy. "A full moon?" Steven Kane's voice was suddenly somber. "You're sure, Lionel?" "Positive. I saw it starting to rise as I came across the park." (As if any magician wouldn't know what phase the moon was in!)

In this book, gravity appears to operate horizontally: "The walls bulged in and out with a disregard for the well-known force of gravity."

However, there are good things to report. The *Guardians*, #2 computer appears to be self-corrective to a considerable degree. It has a fine sense of anticlimax and under-statement: "He did not look middle-aged, he did not feel middle-aged and in fact he was not middle-aged." And when the hero-cat Bubastis scratches Dr. Duval. "His face convulsed with rage and he went outside

for an instant. When he came back he carried a bucket of water, which he emptied over the cage and the cat within. 'Later,' he promised. 'Later I'll really do things to you.' "

Furthermore, here and there the computer questions its own creativity magnificently:

"I take it then, Superintendent, that your action has been nonexistent."

"Everything was strange, a distortion of reality. This surely was not happening."

Agreed.

—Fritz Leiber

Kavin's World, by David Mason, Lancer Books, 75 cents, 221 p.

The blurbs on this book say, "A hero greater than Conan!" (Robert E. Howard's great Cimmerian, who reaches his peak in "People of the Black Circle" and "Beyond the Black River") and also "A world in the tradition of Tolkien!" (everybody knows about him)—yet for once the blurbs seem to me to carry a considerable amount of truth.

This is a damn good sword-and-sorcery story, even though the hair-splitter may object to Mason bringing in primitive guns.

The chief point of (possible) superiority is that Mason has a very sharp eye for reality. For instance, he is a merchant seaman and knows how all sorts of ships operate. In fact, he writes a bit like Xenophon in his *Anabasis*, telling a swift-moving story in a very matter-of-fact way. His language is nicely clipped: "Six manlengths thick," "Moving like mice near a cat," "There's a nation of dead bones in this place."

He has an honesty about himself and people in general:

"Lord Kavin, I am not . . . the

greatest of wizards."

"I know," I said, and grinned. "Nor am I the most powerful of princes."

Or (somehow it strikes me like Lenin), "I find I'm developing a taste for treacherous tricks, as I grow older."

Or—finally—"Honor! Mine is as tattered as a beggar's breeches."

There is wisdom here and there: "More than half of all magic rests with the magician himself, not with the spells or the potions."

And there is occasionally a fine sense for new-invented names: Arastap and Ess Issiassi, for example.

Finally the book ends with an assault by the sword-and-sorcery folk on a country-destroying, waste-expulsive, modern-type city, which reminds me of nothing so much as the city described about 1930 in the unpublished poem by my dead friend Charles Linthicum Hopkins, his "City of Trolls," of which I recall only the opening lines,

When the last frontier is a delicate jest
And death is a laughable fable,

When the islands that reel down the
rim of the west

Must yield up their bounty and give of
their best

To furbish a potentate's table;

When the winds, like young ravens
loosed too soon from the nest,

Are weary of turning a windmill's
wing—

Ah, then shall the Nereids gather and
mournfully sing

And point with their wasted gray
fingers

At the barren shore where they gather
no more,

Where a feebly hesitant, little tide rolls

To the mossy brown stones of the
kelpies and shoals,

Where emaciate Posiedon lingers

Near the wonderful city, the terrible city,

The high-flung, far city of Trolls.

The beginning of a great poem in the manner of Tennyson, Keats, Shelly, or Swinburne. Let's have from Dave Mason a series of sword-and-sorcery novels surpassing Tolkien, Howard, and—I challenge him to a duel!—myself.

—Fritz Leiber

The Foe of Barnabas Collins a "Dark Shadows" novel by Marilyn Ross.

An original novel based on a weekly television series generally contains this basic premise: that as much happens off the air as on; and that all of it is not shown.

Take "The Man From Uncle": It was obvious that the protagonists worked on many more cases than were televised, leaving plenty of room within this background for paperback writers to work in. Thus they were able to create stories which were original, but in no way contradicted the universe of the series.

This can never be true of a book based on a soap opera.

To sustain its illusion of reality, the soap opera presents the daily lives of its characters almost hour by hour and second by second, omitting nothing. No important event goes untelevised, and so there is not room in the universe of the characters for a series of original novels. And because the story lines are so long and complicated (growing out of and into each other), it would be impossible to write a book based on one of them.

It is therefore not surprising to find that the series of novels by Marilyn Ross based on the gothic soap opera "Dark Shadows" has little connection with that show beyond the names of a few characters and the physical location of the stories. Even

the personalities of the characters do not remain the same, but are often so changed in translation that a person who is good on the show may appear briefly in the books as a villain and be killed, however permanent his tenure in the series.

In terms of the television show, then, it is impossible to recommend these books. On their own merits, they are, quite simply, awful.

The Foe of Barnabas Collins stands out among them: it is merely mediocre.

It has all the structural integrity of a deck of cards thrown to the floor and picked up at random. Major characters appear long after the middle of the book with no forewarning and little explanation. The only thing that passes for characterization is the author's repeated statement that the heroine (a vague relation to the protagonists of the t.v. show) possesses a "sensitive" face. In the apparent assumption that the readers of women's gothic romances have short and erratic memories, this description is used once a chapter as a reminder.

Nothing at all passes for a style. The sentences are so awkward and irregular as to produce nausea in any half-way literate reader, much as the rhythm of a swaying train produces car sickness in the normal person. A cursory examination reveals no plot; a closer one would be impossible.

A young woman marries a werewolf; whether he ever truly loved her or not is never made clear: none of his actions are ever explained. No reason is ever given for his being a werewolf. After a while a nice vampire, Barnabas Collins, the demi-hero of the t.v. series, shows up to help her. A long time later Angelique, the villainess of the show, appears and allies herself with the werewolf. Since she never does anything at all it can only be

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 136)

Illinois, near St. Louis.) These continually rising costs put any small publisher in a bind, forcing him to raise his prices, passing the expense along to each reader. About the only costs which have not gone up much in over thirty years are the editorial costs: the rate at which stories are paid for.

Once the magazine is published, it is thrown into the maw of the national distributor, who ships it in turn to regional wholesalers, who subdivide it to local retailers. Each takes a percentage of the cover price. For a 60¢ magazine, this percentage, on a per-copy basis, is not large. A newsdealer who sells ten copies of FANTASTIC, for instance, makes only a dollar or two. Worse yet, better than 50¢—as many as 70¢, sometimes—of the magazines shipped out will not be sold, and must be returned to the publisher for credit. This means additional labor and warehousing expenses.

In actual fact, many wholesalers never open all the bundles they receive. Some will not ship out the magazines but instead tear off the covers or title strips for return for credit (reshipping the bulk of the magazines being too expensive and bothersome), and then dump the coverless magazines into the second-hand black market.

All coverless copies of any magazine are supposed to be pulped or in some fashion destroyed. They are supposed to be those copies which were put on sale, did not sell, and are now out of date. In point of actual fact, a thriving black-market has grown up around the resale of these coverless magazines—usually in the seedier used-magazines and used-books shops in the larger cities—for prices which range from one-quarter to one-half the original price. The publisher never sees a dime of this money, nor does the

national distributor. The profits are split between the retailer and the wholesaler, who has effectively picked up these magazines free.

This is not the only fraudulent practice enjoyed by some wholesalers. Others have blithely informed publishers that, inasmuch as a science fiction magazine is a high-return item (a condition in part created by the wholesaler himself), he will have to insist upon an additional rebate on every copy he handles—say 5¢ a copy over and above his normal share. When the wholesaler who serves the greater Washington, D.C. area made this demand, Hearst (our national distributor) refused. The result is that the wholesaler cut his order from 1,000 copies to 500 copies and we've had dozens of letters from irate readers in the area who can no longer find the magazines.

Other wholesaling malpractices are long-famed. Newsstands which can easily sell two dozen copies of a magazine are shipped only six, while large stacks are shipped to slow-moving stands where they gather dust. Newsdealers sometimes actually order extra copies, only to find their orders refused or ignored. And, despite computerization in recent years, distribution remains a largely nineteenth-century business, dominated by people who simply have no interest in the nature of the publications they handle and little desire to create a favorable climate for selling them. Distribution is, in this Moon Age, less corrupt than inept—and corruption is far from absent.

This is what we are up against. This is one of the major barriers between us and you. Each issue we print something over 80,000 copies, of which you are buying between one-quarter and one-third. I strongly doubt whether more than 40,000 or 50,000 copies reach the newsstands.

It places us in an economically precarious position. We are not alone, of course. Despite the figures you may read in some other sf magazines, all of them (save ANALOG, which prints twice as many copies) are selling about the same number (within ten thousand of the same number) of copies on the newsstands. None are in what can charitably be called a "healthy" position. I understand that the recent drop in sales has been felt in all quarters and not ours alone (perhaps it was only coincidental to our policy and price change). Economists are now speaking of a "soft" market, and we are in the midst of that queer beast, the Nixon Inflationary Recession. When the dollar pinch hits our pockets, we cut back on peripheral purchases. When food prices continue to go up, we buy less books and magazines.

But what it all comes down to is this: sales on this magazine are poor. They have been poor since that December issue, and despite my hopes for an improvement with our return to original covers and snappier designs, the April issue—"Snow Women" and all—has sold no better.

We have come to no decision on policy changes as yet. We have considered returning to reprints—solely because they are one way in which we can reduce our expenses—and we've considered a larger type size (which would mean buying and setting less material each issue). We've also considered holding tight and doing our best to weather this slump out. For the time being, that is our course. I will continue to innovate (as with *Fantastic Illustrated*) whenever it seems possible and appropriate. I will continue to do the best I can with this magazine.

But is that enough?

When I became editor of AMAZING

and FANTASTIC a year and a half ago (amid predictions I would not last six months), I brought with me some specific ideas and plans for the rejuvenation of the magazines. For several years previous I had sounded off in the fan press about the inadequacies of the contemporary sf magazines. I made a number of solid proposals, most of which boiled down to this: a magazine must be edited with love and enthusiasm, and it must communicate those emotions to its audience. I said things about the way editorials ought to be written, the need for direct channels of communication with the readership (such as letter columns and the *Fantasy Fandom* forum), and open discussion of the field (as in the book reviews and Alexei Panshin's new column).

Then Sol Cohen asked me to start practicing what I'd been preaching. And I did. Hesitantly at first (because no matter how large your ego, the expression of it through a magazine is a humbling and awesome experience), and then more surely, I began doing with AMAZING and FANTASTIC all these things I felt *should* be done with a pair of sf magazines.

The bulk of the letters I've received from you tell me I've succeeded. Many of my professional acquaintances, bored with sf magazines and blasé about the field, have told me that they are now again haunting the newsstands awaiting each new issue with an excitement they thought they'd lost ten, fifteen, or twenty years ago.

It's a pleasant ego-boost. But it will not mean a thing if I cannot succeed at my primary purpose: healthy sales. If, when all is said and done, these magazines sell no better than they ever did, no better than when they were thrown together by

atomatons, no better than when they were filled with reprints selected for their page-length, then as an editor I am a failure.

You can imagine that I am disheartened when I find that none of the significant improvements I've made in this magazine—improvements you have applauded—have added up to even a minor increase in sales. It is not an unreasonable assumption that such improvements should attract more readers. And yet they haven't. Why?

I keep returning to the fact that the sf magazines (save one) all sell about the same number of copies—despite their obvious differences in appearance, content, and aim. What does this mean? When I was Assistant Editor at *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, I used to discuss with the publisher, Joe Korman, the extent to which F&SF's sales overlapped those of the other magazines. Joe was convinced the overlap was slight. He had surveys and figures to prove it. Why, then, is *F&SF* selling about the same number of copies (on the newsstands) as *GALAXY*, *IF*, *AMAZING* or *FANTASTIC*? If we are all reaching a *different* thirty-odd-thousand readers, why are we held in check at this figure?

Perhaps I am only rationalizing the apparent failure of an editorial philosophy in which I still believe, but I cannot help thinking that the situation outlined above is not coincidental and may indeed explain a great deal.

What I believe may be happening is a marketing breakdown—a failure in the chain of distribution. If, as I am becoming convinced, only 50% or less of the copies we send out ever arrive at their destinations—the newsstands—it hardly matters what I do, short of filling this magazine with blank pages. There are

obviously at least twenty or thirty thousand people who will buy *anything* on the stands—and, conversely, there seems little chance of reaching more than that number.

Two hundred million people live in this country today. Only one in ten thousand—one person out of the population of a small city—is buying this magazine. This has to be wrong. The *potential* has to be greater than that—and indeed *was* greater, ten, twenty and thirty years ago, when the population was significantly smaller, and sales were much higher. Ignoring other factors, had sales kept pace with the population growth (as might be reasonably expected), we should be selling at least a *quarter of a million copies!* We aren't, and at least fifty-percent of the magazines on your newsstand don't. Yet, the reading habit is not dead, science fiction is more popular than ever, and the magazines *should* reasonably expect (even with competition from tv and books) sales of 100,000.

But there we are: at the bottom of the stack. It's not simply a point of pride, but one of economics. Below a certain point not even the most thrifty budgetting can save a magazine. Below a certain point the only way out is to fold. Each year we are forced closer to that point. It is enough to make any responsible and involved editor lie awake long nights. Perhaps it is enough to trouble you as well.

You say you like what *FANTASTIC* has become. You say you want continued growth and improvement in its content. You're enthusiastic about the magazine.

Okay, it's time to put your money on the line. Last year in *AMAZING* I suggested checking your local newsstand and pulling copies of our magazines out

from behind if they'd been covered up. That was all right as far as it went, but it doesn't go far enough—particularly if your newsstand doesn't always carry the magazines in the first place.

If you really care about this magazine and you want to do something about it, here's what you can do:

You can bug your local newsdealer to carry it, and when he does, you should support him by buying your copies there and, if you can, convincing others to buy their copies there. (In fact, simply turning your friends onto this magazine, if you think it would interest them, would be an enormous help. If each of you found one friend who would buy FANTASTIC, our sales would double. Think about that.)

You can bug your wholesaler. Ask your newsdealer who he is, check your local yellow pages, or take a look at the printed checklist that comes atop the wired bundle of new magazines if you see it before your newsdealer unpacks it. The wholesaler's name and address is at the top of that slip. In the Washington area, particularly, phone calls to the wholesaler complaining about deteriorating distribution might be helpful. Be polite, not nasty. Express your concern. Mention the newsdealer where you used to find copies and can find them no longer. Suggest that if the wholesaler were to put out more copies he'd sell more copies. Etc.

Check out coverless copies on sale. This

is what can really hurt us, since these copies have been effectively pirated from us. Inform any retailer who sells them that he is selling stolen merchandise and violating the law. Attempt to discover the person who sold them to him (he probably won't tell you). It's probably your local wholesaler. Report the store (its name and address) to the Hearst Corporation (959 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y., 10019) and give exact details about the condition of the magazines and books sold there. Presumably Hearst can bring some pressure to bear if made aware of the specific conditions and their probable causes.

Maybe, if enough of you involve yourselves in any of these areas, we can break through this logjam. Perhaps not. Magazines have traditionally appealed to their readers for support in hard times. It has rarely helped.

And yet, and yet . . . I remain convinced that we are doing the right thing and that it has become necessary to enter into what amounts to a conspiracy between you and me, between those of you who are this magazine's ultimate destination and we who put it together, to see to it that this magazine finds its way through the torturous maze of distribution. Maybe we can do it. Maybe we cannot. But if we do not try, we shall never know, and we shall all regret it.

—Ted White

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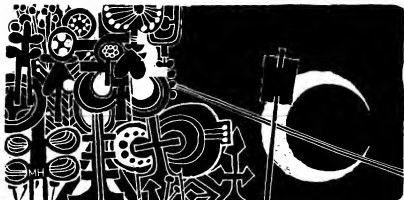
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...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication should be addressed to According To You, c/o P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232

In his letter in the June issue, John J. Pierce threw in a remarkable (to me) paranthetical remark: "... Such New Wave-Thing attacks are usually labeled "spectacular" (that's how one major critic labeled an article insinuating a major editor was paid by the CIA to reissue an old Buck Rogers story)." And I interjected, at that point, *Who said that? And where did such an article appear?* Having done so, I promptly forgot the entire matter until John Pierce told me at the Lunacon that perhaps he'd overestimated the situation—which, with my forgetful memory, left me even further at sea—and then the following note arrived in the mail:

Dear Ted:

I'm afraid that I'm responsible for J.J. Pierce's latest conniption fit in the new FANTASTIC. In an article in KALKI #8, the Cabell fanzine, I observed that

the reprinting of the Nowlan and Rohmer books on sinister Oriental plots coincided in time with serious diplomatic confrontations between the U.S. and China. I put forward for consideration a possible connection between the republication of these works, and the known fact that the CIA subsidizes the publication of books that promote its image of the world. ("The Escape from Escape Literature," KALKI #8, p. 84.) I don't know who the "major critic" may be; it certainly couldn't be me. In a letter to the next issue, Bob Lowndes says there was no such influence. And, in retrospect, the suggestion does sound rather extravagant, although in the original article I was quite tentative in putting it forth.

I think that a good case can be made against the "New Wave" on sound grounds. The only trouble is that Pierce contrives to make all opponents of the "New Wave" sound like his kind of idiot.

John Boardman
234 E. 19th St.
Brooklyn, N.Y.

I'm afraid I would call your original notion, no matter how tentatively broached, more than "extravagant," but I'm glad to see the matter laid to rest and the rumors (such as they were) dealt with. Witch-hunting on the right is no more appetizing to me than witch-hunting on the left, as in the McCarthy era. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I have read and enjoyed Part I of Lee Hoffman's novel "Always the Black Knight" but it brings a question to mind. Is it really fantasy as it says on the cover, or is it actually science fiction? As I understand, fantasy is that branch of fiction which is impossible—a story which could never happen. "Always the Black Knight" concerns a society run (though they don't really know it) by a computer; many science fiction stories have been computer controlled, such as Christopher Anvil's "Strangers to Paradise". These type stories are plausible, therefore science fiction. Stories with people drugged all the time have been written, and these were also plausible. And certainly you're not going to call this novel fantasy because Kyning is teaching Riker to sword fight. Now, after considering these things, is "Always the Black Knight" still a fantasy novel? And if so, why?

As for the rest of the issue, I thought "Psychivore" was the best; I liked it better than any other piece of fiction of this type. Cargy's incident with the three psychivores was suspenseful.

"I of Newton" and "In the Land of Not-Unhappies" were by far the two best short stories. "The Time" was so similar to Bradbury's "Chrysalis" that it was easy to predict its ending.

By the way, your editorial was the best ever, and so original! But you failed to

explain one thing. How did you ever manage to get the job?

Finally, what ever happened to some of the great cover artists FANTASTIC and AMAZING used to have. The ones I mean are: Edward Valigursky, Gabe Keith, and Virgil Finlay; they were great. Of course I'm not trying to degrade today's big names like Jeff Jones, John Pederson, and Gray Morrow, it's just that it would be nice to have some of the old artists back.

John T. Strong
1618 Boyce

Hastings, Nebr. 68901

As I explained a couple of issues back, "fantasy" has a broad definition. By one such definition, any story which appears in this magazine is de facto fantasy. The cover blurb said "A New Kind of Fantasy Novel." That "Always The Black Knight" certainly is: it doesn't fit the neatly prescribed old molds. Basically, I view it as a romantic anti-swords-&-sorcery novel—one in which real people deal with real situations via attempted swords-play and chivalrous notions. But the computers, drugged culture, etc., are only the stage-setting. The story, as you've discovered, is Kyning's . . . and it is, I think, a fantasy, in the larger-than-life sense of that word. How did I get the job? I was recommended for it, took it on for a probationary period, and stayed with it. —TW

Dear Mr. White,

You have managed the impossible! Two good magazines from a stack of garbage. Whatever you want to call them, FANTASTIC and AMAZING have again become worth buying. (Incidentally, I prefer John Strong's suggestion in the title bout.)

The article by "Donald K. Arbogast,"

in the June FANTASTIC, deserves some comment. The New Noxious Weed is a fact of life, even in fandom. Whether it will eventually prove to be a legal one is presently unimportant. It depends on the lawyers and the laboratories, and is still open to debate. My personal opinion is that a hallucination is Nature's way of saying "NO." (As is intoxication.)

The present law is the concern. The use of marijuana endangers not only the user, but those around him. Within fandom there are teachers, researchers, politicians, and the like, who simply cannot afford to be caught in that kind of static.

I don't propose the impossibility of "evicting" the drug-using subgroup from fandom. I do propose that they develop a certain code of ethics with respect to outsiders.

Don't put the other guy in a bind. If you are the guest, respect the wishes, and the reputation, of the host. If you are the host, give the guest fair warning.

The motto of fandom has been "Mind Your Own Business." Every person has the right to go to hell in his own inimitable way. No one, however, has the right to take someone else down with him.

David A. Halterman
Rm. B-04, Toxicology, AFIP
Washington, D.C., 20305

I quite agree with you: and I think the ethic you describe has already been developed pretty much along the lines you suggest. One of the points raised in Arbogast's article, however, is the fact that marijuana users don't seem to be as hell-bound as popular mythology once suggested. Instead—and here most of the country's authorities appear to agree—what we have is a legal situation not unlike that which prevailed during Prohibition, in which the majority of the

"criminals" are solid members of the middle-class, and the network of supply which has grown up has simply created a new profitable area into which Organized Crime has moved or will move. Inasmuch as this impinges upon the sf world, it is a legitimate topic of interest in these pages.

—TW

Dear Ted:

While looking over the April, 1970 FANTASTIC, I came across something which puzzles me. It's on page 97—the Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation.

It states that the total paid circulation of FANTASTIC, counting mail subscriptions, and drug stores and the like is 31,119. (I'm using the average figures.) It also states that the total number of copies printed is 94,278. This means, as is also stated, that you have 62,974 copies left over for various reasons.

Why is there so many excess copies? I mean, if you have an average of 30,000 copies sold each issue, why do you print up to 95,000 copies? I can understand having 40,000 printed up to make sure that you have enough to go around, including office copies and CCs, but having 62,000 extra??? To me, that seems rather wasteful, especially at a time when you're reviving FANTASTIC and would need to conserve waste.

Okay, I can understand a reasonable amount of waste, because of printing, collating, and then there's those office copies and others reserved for various other uses, but ghod, your waste is twice your circulation! Can't something be done about this?

Hope you can explain this. Many thanks.

Steve Riley
18 Norman Drive.
Framingham, Mass., 01701

Well, Steve, to begin with I suggest you read the editorial. The figure of 62,000 copies (roughly) does not represent left-over copies kicking around out back in the garage somewhere. It is the number of copies we've sold subtracted from the number we've printed, and that's all. You're right that it's a high figure: that's why this magazine is in trouble. It represents about two thirds of the copies printed. What happens to those copies? Well, as I said in the editorial, most of them are never put on sale. They may languish in bales in wholesalers' warehouses, may be sent to retailers who return them unopened, or may be moved at any point in this chain into the coverless-copy black-market, at which point they are totally lost to us. But if we didn't print as many copies as we do, we'd get an even smaller number on sale, and sell even fewer copies. If we, for instance, printed only 40,000 copies, we'd probably get no more than fifteen or twenty thousand onto the stands, be totally missing from large sections of the country, and find our sales quickly lapsing to ten or twelve thousand. The problem is a total lack of efficiency in the marketing system that demands we throw away at least as many copies as we sell, if not twice as many. We don't like it, but we haven't any alternative. It's a tough problem, and we aren't kidding when we say that we need your help.

—TW

Dear Mr. White:

I've just finished my first copy of FANTASTIC (June). I'm mailing in my subscription today because I don't want to chance missing the rest of "Always the Black Knight." The title of the magazine has put me off for quite a while; some time ago I'd decided that life was too

short to spend it wading through pulps looking for the pony in all that crap. Although I don't think changing the title would make much difference in your sales (any title will put some people off), here's my entry for the name debate: fanTAStic. (Or WILD maybe.) (Why? —TW)

If you want to really be with it you should skip a word title entirely and select a symbolgram: i.e., like Bell Telephone's new bell-shape. This would make letter-writing difficult—drawing in the symbolgram—and conversation all but impossible. But it would be oh-so stylish.

Trust you appreciate the above helpful suggestions. I hereby praise all the stories and tell you to keep up the good work. (Speaking of errors, why did your editorial list Box 73 and ". . . According to You" give Box 72 as the address?)

C. Nelson

23959 Archwood St.

Canoga Park, Calif., 91304

My Mr. Fish at the post office asked me the same question. The answer is that somewhere along the line the 3 became a 2, and nobody noticed it. Not, in fact, until the issue was on the stands and letters began coming in to the wrong box. Ah well. Never a dull moment. Symbolgrams may work as trademarks, but not, I expect, to the exclusion of a written name. We'd feel it first when our distributor's billing system lost some teeth on it.

—TW

Dear Ted,

I think you've done it again—your publication of Alexei Panshin's new column *SF In Dimension* is another reassurance that your magazines never stop growing. It's about time that

something like this was done, straightforwardly, by a writer with talent, intelligence, and knowledge/education. Will these columns eventually be bound into a critical book? (*That is a possibility.* —TW)

I know I find myself sadly agreeing with him on too many observations about the field: especially publishing restrictions, and the qualitative limitations of literary achievement. However, there are a few points I feel are debatable, at the least:

First, the idea that general audiences might be put off more by crude sf conventions (like melodrama), than even by ignorance and fear of the field. There may be another expression to this problem. Those two points do coincide at times: ignorance and disdain arises from the unfortunate fact that the "samplers" of sf always manage to pick and choose from among the worst stuff—which, also unfortunately, is in the majority); hence, venturing no further, they draw an abrupt conclusion that all sf stinks. Also, cultural conventions and prejudices (what you are taught to like, what is "good" in art, and even what is "proper" as art) help keep people who (usually early in life) are ot particularly obstinate and eccentric (like us) away. But somewhere, as part of all this, is perhaps a certain "mind-set" in the general reading public's approach to fictional (and specifically sf) art. H.P. Lovecraft touched on a very similar area when he wrote that he believed supernatural literature to be an important but limited area of art because it is only appreciated by comparatively few people who have certain sensitivities to the qualities it embodies. This has often made me wonder—is it true (similarly in sf), or are the masses just stupid/prejudiced/unaware, or some

combination of both?

The public doesn't seem as if it can, or wants to, "get into" sf. There are certain tastes evident—the breeding of tell-it-like-it-is, life-in-the-raw best-sellers (which don't often do either)—this is what they can grasp and "identify" with and, most horribly of all, think is the ultimate in good art (when it almost never is *any* art). This obsession with vulgar treatments of mundane societal processes that are better suited to documentary/informational media (not literary art) seems at odds with even simply the general form of most sf. This is why it takes Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* to put traditional sf on the best-seller list (with *The Love Machine* and *The Godfather*)—it is so rooted in "today" that its idea of an uncheckable infectious plague from outside the planet was, a few months from the book's release, a publicized speculation in the first moon-walk shot. Here is something close to us, that we can "relate" to. The good mainstream reviews the book got only make things look worse; and, worse still, the fact that some reviewers seemed to consider it the epitome of sf (that old ignorance again . . .); and, yet further, the implication that it is not worth mention on the same level as Literature.

Isn't there "mind-set" in all of this somewhere? If there were any individual intelligence involved, rotten sf conventions wouldn't be enough to put off everyone—you don't stop breathing because the air is polluted. Maybe the public can't see the forest for the (cultural) trees. I'm not sure anymore . . .

Other things:

I hope Mr. Panshin will delve further into the concept of sf as the Elizabethan

theater after Marlowe, but before Shakespeare. It certainly can be elaborated on.

But I must seriously question: "Zelazny and Delany have superceded their predecessors but not surpassed them." Employing "predecessors" as a general term, I think that these two (and other) writers most certainly have. Obviously, they are much better educated in the arts and, talent-wise, can be as good literary stylists as anyone now writing. Beyond this, there is definitely a qualitative difference in the nature of their insights (both scientific and human), how they express them and utilize the more conventional elements of sf. The "form" may be superficially similar, but there is a world of difference going on beneath (anyone who thought *Isle Of The Dead* was rather conventionally familiar but well-written should look again). The form need not be drastically different in order to perform more than a glossy "superceding" maneuver. (Of course, I don't mean sf to remain the same, either.)

Lastly, another problem is that tempting correlative activity of "matching up writers." Zelazny or Delany equals Thomas Kyd. The same with (I think it was) Judith Merrill who said Delany may be developing into the Joseph Conrad of sf. Even if I've misremembered, the point is this: *why* must Delany become the Conrad of sf? *Why* can he not be simply Samuel Delany? And *why*, given time, can not Delany "be" what he "is" greater than what Conrad "is" (in his own work)? It's a possibility . . .

I don't think the literary conventions and criteria match up all down the line across sf to the mainstream. And I don't think they can merge without drastic

change in the nature of one of them (and I hardly think it will be sf). The fact is, I feel that (although instances have been rare) sf (in potential) can offer purely literary/aesthetic qualities that can *never* be achieved by the "mainstream"; this is the most important dignity the form can have—it is not a substitute for anything else. One just has to look at sf for itself, not as some sort of amusing cultural freak . . .

Actually, I hugely enjoyed Mr. Panshin's column, and thanks for inaugurating it.

Jeff Clark

48 South Lawn Ave.

Elmsford, N.Y. 10523

As a matter of fact, the bulk of the mail which has come in on the June issue has been devoted to Science Fiction in Dimension, and will be passed on to Alexei Panshin. Unfortunately, the press of time has made it impossible for me to spend my usual amount of time in compiling this column, and as a consequence neatly-typed double-spaced letters like yours—which I do not have to retype—have received preference over a great many others. My apologies to those of you who had pertinent comments on the Panshin column, but if you will double-space your future letters, their inclusion will be much easier for this weary one-finger typist. —TW

Dear Ted,

We have just picked up on the June FANTASTIC, and were impressed by the article by Donald K. Arbogast. His experiences amazingly parallel those of our Recording secretary, who until recently lived in a large city on the coast himself.

High-ho.

Ronald Bowman
Co-responding Secretary
The Milford Mafia (N.J.)
Headquarters
Milford, New Jersey

P.S. I believe you know my cousin.
Would that be Sophie Glutz? —TW

Dear Mr. White:

Why don't you, on some page, print each previous appearance of a hero in a short story in that issue, say, titles & dates of the magazines. That way, I will know which issues to order from the SF magazine ad for out-of-date issues on your inside back cover.

Kirk Messmer
302 Railroad St.

Henderson, Mich., 48841

Well mostly, Kirk, because very few of the heroes in any given story are carryovers from previous issues. When this does happen, I usually mention at least the last appearance of the character in the story's blurb. Ideas such as yours have an intriguing simplicity, but even when workable usually make extra demands on my already limited time. I wish I could put them all into effect, but it just isn't possible. Nonetheless, I'm always glad to hear your suggestions, and every so often one of them will make me say, "Why didn't I think of that?" and put it into immediate effect. —TW

Dear Ted White,

In his review of Judith Merrill's *Daughters of Earth*, Fritz Leiber wrote: "A fairly competent template or series story—say a Doc Savage or John Carter novel—can be written by any number of qualified and enthusiastic or merely hungry authors, because the birth has already taken place and all that is asked

for is a rebirth." I must disagree with Mr. Leiber. The remark was casual enough for one to read and not give a second thought. I do not mean to imply that Leiber had intended any malice towards either Burroughs or Robeson, it's just that it infuriated me to see my favorite sf author (Burroughs) called just "fairly competent."

Leiber's remark seems to me to reflect the attitude of present fandom in general towards the "oldies" in the field. They are regarded as nostalgic reminders of a long past age, whose works can be commented on laughingly as "corny." Most fans won't even condescend to read one of their works. Robert E. Howard is about the only one who is still read by anyone who has anything to do with fantasy or sf, and this only because of the growing interest in Sword and Sorcery type fiction nowadays.

An interesting pattern arises here. It's obvious to anyone who has read "The Snow Women" that Howard most certainly influenced Leiber as he has almost all S&S writers. It is also a known fact that Howard was influenced by Burroughs. One could say that Leiber was indirectly influenced by Burroughs. If such is the case, imagine my annoyance mixed with umor when I read Leiber's comment. What say you to that?

Tom Sinclair
156-20 Riverside Dr.
New York, N.Y., 10032

I'd say you were refining too much upon Fritz's comment. I'm sure he can defend himself quite ably in this instance, but allow me to point out to you several facts. The first is that "Robeson" is a house-name under which several authors did write the Doc Savage stories (and one or more others wrote the Avengers stories for the pulp magazine of that name). Among

these authors was the able pulp hack, Lester Dent. The second is that Fritz Leiber himself has written a Burroughs continuation, Tarzan and the Valley of Gold (Ballantine), and undoubtedly

knows Burroughs' writings more intimately than you do. And third, most of what you object to is irrelevant to Leiber's observation. Fritz, have you anything to add? —Ted White

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 123)

assumed that she is merely a sop to any fans of the program who might pick up the book.

There is no real climax. About a third of the way in Barnabas shows the werewolf that there is a secret underground room built under the spooky old mansion where he and the heroine live. The werewolf goes down to investigate it. At the end of the book he goes down again with the witch. Barnabas floods it, killing them. He could have

done this at the outset, long before Angelique came or anyone was killed. But then there would have been no book. Which might have been just as well.

Twenty-four pages before the end an old boy friend shows up so the heroine will have someone to marry when her husband is destroyed.

Summation: Even the cover is bad. Forget it. Go out to a movie instead.

Hank Stine

FANTASTIC BRIEFS—

You've undoubtedly noticed Fritz Leiber's absence from the past two issues of this magazine. Fritz suffered the loss of his wife last September, spent the next few months in poor health, and subsequently pulled up stakes to relocate himself in the San Francisco Bay Area. His *Fantasy Books* reviews were a casualty of these various events, but have returned with this issue. Naturally, ranked alongside the upheavals he has suffered, our own loss of his column is minor. We're pleased to hear that things seem to be looking up for him now, and we want to wish Fritz the success and happiness he richly deserves.

It was purely coincidental that Alexei Panshin's column should begin in the first issue in which Fritz was absent; both will continue side-by-side. Your letters indicate that *Science Fiction in*

Dimension is, if not the most popular feature in this magazine, certainly the most controversial.

A number of readers have queried us about the *Fantasy Fandom* column and in answer to you all, yes, the space is wide open for any reader who wishes to make a statement in some respect pertinent to the field. Contributions to *Fantasy Fandom* will be selected on the basis of the points you have to make and your skill in expressing them. If you've been looking for a podium to speak from—whether you are a fan or a professional—send your contribution (accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope in case we cannot use it) to *Fantasy Fandom*, P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232. It's your soap box.

—Ted White

castle and take over."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think—with my new powers—I can handle the king quite easily."

"You're crazy."

"We'll find out," she said. "Come on."

They moved forward.

The manbats saw them, sounded the alarm.

A dense cloud of the demors sprang into the air from the battlements and swept toward them, wings flapping, dark eyes gleaming, claws sprung and ready to slash . . .

Chapter Twenty: PSIONIC BATTLE

"SO MANY of them," Kaliglia moaned.

The manbats fluttered down towards them. The first of the flock touched ground and scuttled forward, snarling, slobbering, their wicked fangs greenish-yellow and very, very sharp. There were easily eighty of them, and Jake felt certain they would sweep across and kill all three of them before Cheryn could burn them. But she did not plan, after all, to burn them anyway. When the bats were only twenty feet away, they stopped abruptly and dropped their arms to their sides. Their wings folded behind them, and some of the luster went from their eyes. They waited until Cheryn, Jake, and Kaliglia had passed, then fell into line behind them.

"What goes?" Jake asked.

"They know who is more powerful," she said. "They are on our side now."

"I don't know if I like having that sort on my side," he said.

"Better than against us."

"True. True enough."

The manbats scuttled behind, an impressive rear guard.

They walked across the drawbridge, and the two guards there stood back to let them pass, their swords limp at their sides. They moved into the great hallway and were confronted by a Talented, a black-robed man, squat and ugly with warts all over the left side of his face. "So," he said, rubbing his hands together and advancing carelessly, "my winged friends bring me prisoners."

"Look again," Cheryn advised. "They aren't bringing us. We're bringing them."

The Talented was suddenly surprised. He took several steps backward, then turned on Cheryn. He threw spears at her, creating them out of thin air. She turned them back on him so suddenly that the thobs punctured him in a dozen places. He fell backwards with a clatter, bleeding all over the beautiful floor.

They moved on.

Somehow, the alarm had been sounded. At the next bend in the corridor, two more Talented were waiting. The first created a shield of protection about them, while the second created bolts of fire which he shot at Cheryn and her entourage. The bolts of fire bounced off their targets and ricocheted about the room, sputtering and dying, catching the long, velvet curtains on fire.

The Talented hurled boulders now, boulders with steel spikes thrusting out of them as thickly as quills on the back of an enraged porcupine. The spined boulders were flung back at them, disappeared as the Talented released his hold on them.

Cheryn reached out and set their shield on fire, turned it into burning stone.

The two Talented screamed, tried to get out of their blazing prison. The

flaming rock collapsed inward upon them, disappeared, taking their bodies with it.

They walked on.

As they entered the main throne room where the portal between worldlines existed, they were met by King Lelar. He stood on the throne platform, dressed in brilliant white robes, an orange crescent on his right shoulder, an orange crescent on the center of the cape that flowed behind him like wings.

"Far enough!" he roared.

"Not far enough," Cheryn said.

"You're back," Lelar said. "I would know where you went through the Portal and how you returned without using it."

"You will never find out," Cheryn said.

"Ah, still as fiery as ever," the king said, smiling lopsidedly.

"More than ever," she replied.

They kept advancing.

"Far enough!" Lelar roared, creating a set of steel bars from floor to ceiling of the room, another set immediately behind them, enclosing them. He grinned. "Quite foolish of you to return, really. You were fortunate to have escaped. I will have no mercy this time, my dear. I feel you would not be that good a lover anyway. Perhaps you are *too* fiery."

Cheryn smiled. At the foot of the bars, small rodents appeared. They began to nibble at the steel. Soon, they were gobbling it at a fantastic rate, crawling toward the ceiling, using the bar they were eating for purchase. In second, the bars were gone—as were the bloated rodents.

"Very good," Lelar said. But he wasn't smiling now.

Abruptly, there were ropes around both of them, and Kaliglia—who had just barely squeezed down the hallway and into the throne room through the great

double doors—was bound and on his back like a pig to be spitted.

The ropes turned to snakes and slithered off their charges, freeing them, slid across the floor and bit Lelar's legs.

The king screamed and backed toward the throne.

Mouths opened in the floor and swallowed the snakes.

Cheryn threw a ball of blue fire at Lelar.

He caught it in a bowl of yellow energy and slung it back.

It dissipated before it reached them.

Lelar sent a thousand red bees at them with stingers an inch long.

Cheryn raised her hands, grinning.

The bees turned to flowers and fell to the floor.

Lelar pointed at the brilliant blossoms.

They decayed and formed a mound of rot. The rot began to jell into a half-formed, hideous graveyard beast. It pushed to its rotten feet and trudged toward them, groaning, its mouth open, a black hole in its mangled head.

Cheryn turned it into a pretty young girl in a low-cut dress.

The girl curtsied and disappeared.

Lelar squinted and exercised full powers.

The room seemed to disappear and was replaced with a swirling, boiling sea of colors. There were streams of blue, pools of ocher, geysers of yellow and peach, splashes of green, fountains of crimson and cinnabar. Color burst and bloomed about them, blinding them. Slowly, Lelar swam at them through the shifting, bubbling hues. He sat in yoga position, levitated, floating nearer and nearer.

Jake reached out for something.

There was nothing to grab.

His hands closed on crimson . . .

The crimson flowed through his

fingers . . .
 He flailed . . .
 He hugged his arms around
 amber . . .
 The amber turned to bubbles . . .
 Burst .
 Was gone . . .
 He was lying in a pool of onyx . . .
 There was a brown and purple sky
 overhead . . .
 Lelar was descending through it . . .
 White and orange lightnings played
 around the king's head . . .
 Kaliglia bleated . . .
 Lelar drew closer . . .
 He was grinning . . .
 Cinnabar fields beneath a waving,
 rippling black and blue sky
 Dancing rouge . . .
 Leaping violet . . .
 Cheryn in a burst of blue . . .
 Red robes fluttering
 Lelar laughing . . .
 Cheryn hurling yellow balls . . .
 Lelar dodging .
 Noise building . . .
 Building . . .
 Louder . . .
 Booming thunder and tinkling
 bells . . .
 Red waves crashing on a green
 shore . . .
 Trumpets blaring . . .
 Cymbals clashing . . .
 Crashing . . .
 Building towards a crescendo . . .
 It came to Jake that they just might
 lose the battle .
 Just might lose .
 Just might . . .
 Boom! A burst of black tinted yellow at
 the edges .
 An explosion of blue with a white
 core . . .
 Trombones . . .

Trumpets . . .
 Drums . . .
 Strange horns . . .
 Screaming towards a climax . . .
Explosion!
 And darkness.

Chapter Twenty One: THE KINGDOM OF JAKE

WHEN HE CAME TO, Cheryn was slumped at his side, unconscious. He lay, waiting for the scythe of Lelar's power to cut them both in half. But no blow came. After a few minutes, he stirred himself, sat up. Lelar was nowhere in sight. The throne room looked perfectly normal. At the rear, the manbats lay in heaps, also knocked out from the blinding explosion of energy that had been set when Cheryn and Lelar locked minds. He turned Cheryn over and looked at her. She was smiling. He slapped her face carefully, and she moved, groaned, opened her eyes.

"Lelar—" he said.

"I destroyed him," she answered. "It was rather close, though."

He burst out laughing as the tension drained from him. He pulled her close and hugged her. "It's now the Kingdom of Cheryn," he said excitedly.

"No," she said.

Behind, Kaliglia moaned and woke up, grumbled something.

"What do you mean?"

"It's the Kingdom of Jake," she said, smiling.

"Wait a minute—"

"You will draw the Talented together for a good purpose now," she said. "You can teach them things of your world. Maybe we can sneak back to your

world—without dragons this time—and gather up information to restore the sciences on this world. We'll take only the good from your line. We'll elevate the Commoners."

"You could do all that yourself if—"

"It needs a man," she said. "And you're very much a man. You be the king, Jake. Please. I'll be the queen. We need you as king because you know how your people fight. And now that they know how to cross the worldlines, they'll be taking your PBT and coming through by the dozens. We'll need good plans to fight them off."

"She's right," Kaliglia affirmed. "Listen to her."

A kingdom of his own. Yes, there certainly was more magic in this worldline. And it was true: they would need his help to ward off the attacks from the other worldline. At all costs, they had to keep the unmagical world from tainting this place of witches and dragons. "Okay," he said. "It's a deal."

"Good."

"And now, for my first act as King."

"What's that?" she asked.

He grinned and took her hand. "I now pronounce us man and wife."

And he kissed her.

Kaliglia groaned, giggled, chuckled, and finally laughed out loud.

—Dean R. Koontz

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 83)

He raised his arm for Jake to see, then dropped it as a signal when he started the timer. The blast would probably take the whole leg, but only the girders were necessary if both charges went.

As Jake came back Ragan studied the effect. Two legs on one side would be at least badly damaged, and the weight of the tower could be depended on to buckle them, toppling the whole structure. It would fall full length on the buildings next to it.

He nodded in satisfaction. Now to get back home.

They could run faster now, without the packs. They crossed the street quickly. In a few moments they were lost among the shadows, heading toward the fence once more.

Behind them the night sounds settled, broken only by occasional gunfire in the distance. The charges were ticking.

To Work Supervisor #49:

This account of a South American guerilla action in the early history of the

famous Last Phase of the Revolution was found recently in some otherwise unimportant papers. In that it describes the courageous struggle by non-Party elements against the reactionary monopolies known to have governed the United States at that time, it is unique.

This non-Party faction was destroyed in subsequent stages of the Last Phase, but they proved most useful in the struggle and this particular stage, being somewhat out of the ordinary, probably deserves some mention in the Official History of that time, currently being compiled in Nanking.

It has been stated by several historians that without these alienated groups who were systematically excluded from the political workings of the reactionary cliques, there is some doubt that the Last Phase would have succeeded at all.

I commend the document to your inspection.

(signed)

Ling Chen.

—Greg Benford

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WHEN FREAKS WERE FREAKS



THIS NEW STUFF A.B.M. IS ALL
VERY WELL... I'VE TRIED IT MYSELF...



BUT ITS GETTING OUT OF HAND! IT MAKES
GOOD OLD L.S.D. LOOK LIKE BUBBLE GUM...



AND, SURE, NOT HAVING TO
WORK IS GROOVY...



BUT THESE DAMN IDENTI-
NUMBERS ARE UGLY AS HELL
...EVEN IF THEY ARE IN 39
DIFFERENT DAY-GLO COLORS!



AND... EVEN SEX ISN'T THE
SAME SINCE WE ALL WENT
STERILE IN THE 'FLASH'
WAR OF '75!



I CAN'T BLAME THIS ALL ON
SPIRO...



AFTER NIXON WAS WIPED OUT BY A
BATTALLION OF HARD-CORE MINUTEMEN
IN EARLY '71 SPIRO DID HIS BEST TO
BE PRESIDENT...



UNLIKE SOME OF MY OLD BUDDIES...
I DIDN'T REALLY MIND THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS...

U.S.
CAMP MCCARTHY
MAXIMUM SECURITY
LONG HAired FREAKS,
DUPES, REVOLUTION-
ARIES, UPPITY BLACKS
AND EFFETE SNOBS.

THERE WAS A 'TOGETHERNESS'
AIR ABOUT THEM WHICH I FOUND
RATHER NICE...



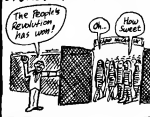
HELL!... EVEN THE
GUARDS WERE TURNING
ON!



YES, WE LEARNED A LOT
DURING THOSE YEARS. EGO
TRANSCENDENCE... THE
WHOLE BIT.



I WAS ALMOST SORRY
WHEN THE CAMPS WERE
OPENED UP AFTER '75.



1975... WHATTA YEAR! GM AND GE
AND ALL THOSE OLD COMPANIES WERE
ALL NATIONALISED...



AND NEXT THING WE KNEW... IT WAS
BIG BROTHER IN PERSON!



WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT IT OF RUDD?
I MEAN, I CAN STILL REMEMBER
COLUMBIA AND ALL...



IT JUST GOES TO SHOW YOU! LEFT...
RIGHT... BIG DEAL DIFFERENCE...



MUSIC ? HOW'S MUSIC
IN THE FUTURE ?



WELL... I CAN'T
SAY I CARE FOR
THE NEW STUFF
THE TEENS ENJOY...



THEY LOCK THEIR BODIES
DIRECTLY INTO COMPUTER
CIRCUITS, Y'SEE, AND
PROGRAM UP ELECTRICAL
IMPULSES...



NOW... I'M TOO OLD
FOR THAT I'M
AFRAID!



I JUST LIKE TO SLIP A
SOUND-CUBE INTO MY
MUSIC-MODULE SYSTEM
& LISTEN TO...



OH... ZAPPA'S 23RD
IN D MINOR...



OR MCCARTNEY AND
LENNON'S OLD
COMIC-OPERAS...



OH YES,
HONEST?



ULP... TIME TO
RETURN!



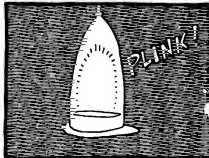
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PIECE OF ADVICE TO
GIVE YOU BEFORE I GO...



COUGH... COUGH... OH
YES... THE ADVICE...
UM... BE SURE TO--



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